WORLDS OF TOMORROW

DECEMBER 1963
50c

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THE GOD-PLLLNK By JEROME BIXBY
ALL WE MARSMEN By PHILIP K. DICK

THE CREATURE INSIDE
A "Contact" Story
By JACK SHARKEY

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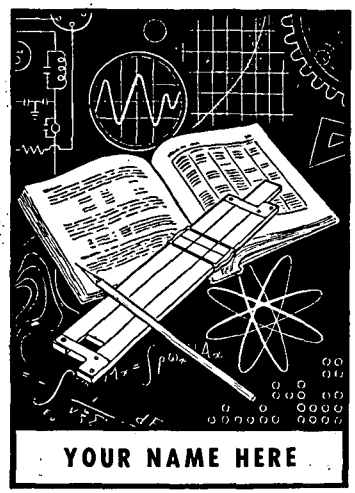

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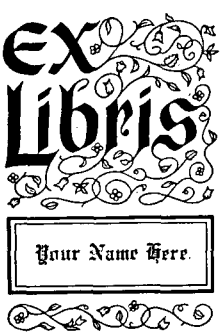

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WORLDS OF TOMORROW®

DECEMBER 1963

Vol. 1 No. 5

ALL NEW STORIES

CONTENTS

NOVELETTES

THE TROUBLE WITH TRUTH 7
by Julian F. Grow

THE CREATURE INSIDE 25
by Jack Sharkey

GOODLIFE 41
by Fred Saberhagen

FAR AVANAL 66
by J. T. McIntosh

SHORT STORIES

THE GOD-PLLLNK 37
by Jerome Bixby

THE GREAT SLOW KINGS 97
by Roger Zelazny

WHEN YOU GIFFLE 103
by L. J. Stecher, Jr.

SERIAL - Conclusion

ALL WE MARSMEN 111
by Philip K. Dick

SPECIAL ARTICLE

SCIENCE AND SCIENCE FICTION: WHO BORROWS WHAT? 59
by Michael Girsdansky

Every sf writer is asked, "Where do you get your new ideas?" Maybe we should ask scientists that question!

FEATURES

EDITORIAL 4
by Frederik Pohl

COMING . . . TOMORROW! 40

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WORLDS OF TOMORROW is published bi-monthly by GALAXY PUBLISHING CORP. Main Offices: 421 Hudson Street, New York 14, N.Y. 50c per copy. Subscription: (6 copies) $2.50 per year in the United States, Canada, Mexico, South and Central America and U. S. Possessions. Elsewhere $3.50. Application for second class entry pending at New York, N.Y.. and at additional mailing offices. Copyright, New York 1963, by Galaxy Publishing Corp. Robert M. Guinn, President. All rights, including translations reserved. All material submitted must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelopes. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories printed in this magazine are fiction, and any similarity between characters and actual persons is coincidental. Printed in the U.S.A. By The Guinn Co., Inc., N.Y. Title Reg. U.S. Pat. Off.

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On People and Pi

Thirty-odd years ago, when science fiction first began to appear in dependable supply in this country, it was an unusual event for one reader to meet another—like being shipwrecked among some Pacific tribe, and having the headman respond to a Masonic grip. Now it is almost as unusual for a reader to meet someone who has never read science fiction. Question is, why? What happened?

For one thing, of course, there's more science fiction around now than there was a generation ago. It can be found not only in its pure form—in magazines like this one, that is!—but in one admixture or another, on radio and TV, in motion pictures and plays, in mass-circulation magazines and comic books. But we suspect that this is not so much an answer as another effect of the same underlying cause. And we think the cause lies in popular attitude—not toward science fiction itself but toward time.

Until quite recently (you can set the date anywhere you like, from a couple of centuries ago until perhaps last week, depending on how much of the Earth's population you want to take in), the prevailing man's eye view of time was that it was simply something to be endured.

Naturally change was involved. But it was a change without a plus or minus sign; the great cultures of the past were cyclical rather than progressive. This does not mean that there was no concept of progress—that is, of change in the direction of a more rewarding or less arduous life—but it does mean that "progress" occurred on an individual scale. Gunter the peasant saved his coppers to buy an ox; Marcus the centurion counted years until his retirement from the legions to a life of ease. A man could hope to improve his own lot, but what was missing was the concept of improvement—or indeed of any real change at all—in the lot of the society itself. Utopias and heavens were dreamed of—but in a hereafter, not here and now on Earth.

All this time, of course, from the invention of the city eight thousand years ago to the conquest of the New World, there was real progress. The Average Man in Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon was sicker, hungrier, worse housed and worse dressed than the Average Man in Shakespeare's London. But the rate of change was only a crawl. It was no more possible for an individual to see change in his own lifetime than it was for him to

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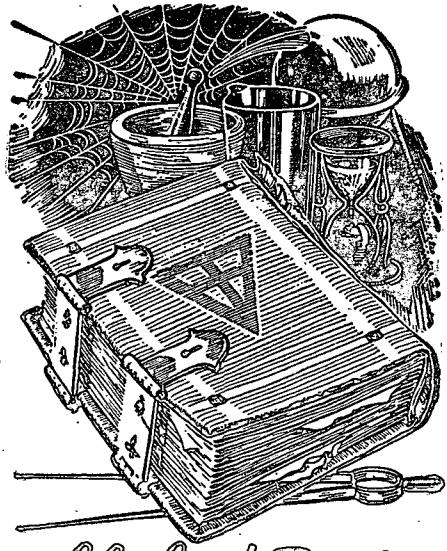
Secrets entrusted to a few



The Unpublished Facts of Life

THERE are some things that cannot be generally told—*things you ought to know.* Great truths are dangerous to some—but factors for *personal power* and *accomplishment* in the hands of those who understand them. Behind the tales of the miracles and mysteries of the ancients, lie centuries of their secret probing into nature's laws—their amazing discoveries of *the hidden processes of man's mind,* and *the mastery of life's problems.* Once shrouded in mystery to avoid their destruction by mass fear and ignorance, these facts remain a useful heritage for the thousands of men and women who privately use them in their homes today.

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measure the cooling of the stars.

Now . . . we are all timebinders, we all see change, we all work toward tomorrow! Not just science-fiction readers—everybody! Every year a new technological marvel to save us drudgery or a new pharmaceutical to slay an old plague. Sf and the scientific press promised us television, radar, rockets, atomic power—and, behold!, they have all come true; and the promises are still being made, and we know that they too will be kept—not a million years from now or in heaven, but perhaps in our own lives.

So when a generation ago only a scattering of individuals had the orientation that would make science fiction intelligible to them, now it is the basic orientation of our society. We look to the future. And we all read science fiction—either in magazines like this, or in watered-down and derivative form elsewhere.

This opens the question of whether science fiction is on its way out—doomed to disappear into the gray mass of "general" fiction, as most other categories already have done.

We think not. We think the moral of the story is only that our writers have to work hard now to find *new* things to say, *new* vistas to open to our view . . . .

And we think they will!

Not long ago, in *Galaxy*, we had some remarks to make about the way in which classic "impossible" problems turn out to be possible enough as soon as we learn to ask the questions in the right way—what you can't do with geometry, algebra or some higher discipline will handle with ease. This is true, for example, of such ancient puzzlers as the trisection of the angle and the duplication of the cube.

This isn't quite what happened with the squaring of the circle. We still haven't learned how to solve it (except in approximations—as close as you like, but still approximations); and in fact, essentially what we have learned after twenty-odd centuries of study of this problem is not merely that we still can't do it, but that no one *ever* will be able to do it. For the attempt to square the circle is in essence the search for an exact value for *pi*. That is, a square equal in area to a circle of radius *r* must by definition be made up of sides each of which is *r* times the square root of *pi* in length.

But we know beyond doubt that *pi* is an irrational number — have known it, in fact, for a century. And a distinguishing characteristic of irrational numbers (as Euclid himself knew) is that they are incommensurable with rational numbers like 7 or the cube root of 1,907,375.863 . . . that is, they cannot be measured in terms of each other *or of any common measure*. And incommensurable quantities cannot be equal.

And so we learn that we have asked one more question the wrong way. Instead of asking, "How can we construct a square equal in area to a given circle?" we should have asked, "*Is* there a square which is equal in area to a given circle?"

And the answer is, "No." In fact —no square is equal in area to *any* circle! END

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THE TROUBLE WITH TRUTH

BY JULIAN F. GROW

ILLUSTRATED BY LUTJENS

Nobody knows where it will end. I only know where it began—in Rutlan—twenty-four hours ago!

I

"The WPA stinks," Sara said.

Now, I've known Sara four years. We've been engaged three times and married once — only marriage, not matrimony — so I pretty much know what to expect from her. I didn't speak.

She rummaged in her belt pouch and waved something from it under my nose. It was a plastic tube, pointed and dark at one end. "Do you know what this is?" She said it loud enough to make people at other tables look away from the program on the Rutlan Community Room cubeo.

As it happened, I did know what it was. "Sure," I said. "It's a pencil."

"A pencil!" she hissed back. "A pencil such as they've been making for, I don't know, maybe three hundred years. Plastic and a black core, that's all. An atavistic, human writing instrument. But there is more real, solid news in this one pencil than in all the gadgets and wires and whirling wheels of the whole stinking WPA, your World Press

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Association! And in one edition of my poor little *Argus*, that funny little country monthly...

Fortunately, at this point, the familiar Thomas Edison Pageant broadcast ended and the announcer on the cubeo rang his Town Crier bell. Copies of the Northeast Region edition of the *Sun* began pouring out of the Fotofax slot. As a matter of habit I rose and got a *Sun* for each of us, Sara taking hers with a snort, and sat down again as the announcer gave the World Press Association opening format:

"An informed people is a free people," he droned. "Read your *Sun* and know the truth. Stand by now for an official synopsis of the day's happenings prepared by the World Press Association."

We both got up to go, leaving our *Suns* behind as most in the room later would too. "Oh, I almost forgot," Sara said, the way she does when she's been thinking about something all day. "That reminds me. I'm pregnant."

"Ah?" I said. "Okay. Good." Not just marriage this time: matrimony it was. We walked out, and she held my hand, a thing she doesn't normally do.

On the belt-way to Milbry and Sara's house, some 48 kiloms north of Rutlan, we talked about getting wed. I lay back in the seat of my car and through the roof watched the December snow fall — making plans with only half a mind for moving from my Nork apartment, deciding whether to keep both cars, arguing whether the commute to Nork took 40 or 45 minutes, choosing a sex for the baby. Mostly I was thinking about what Sara had said about the *Sun*. I'm a Reporter, after all.

When the car locked onto the exit tramway and started deceleration, I suggested that we go to the *Argus* office first. Her apartment was just upstairs anyway. "We had better," I said, "have a little talk."

The demand sensor of the radiant heater in front of the *Argus* building was, as usual, out of order, so we didn't linger. Sara pressed her ID bracelet against the night lock and the door swung open with a squawk that lifted my hair.

Once when I asked her why she didn't get it fixed, she said it saved the price of a cowbell on a spring. I told her then that Vermont had no business in the 21st century, and she said the 21st century had no business in Vermont, the 19th had been more fun. Fun! She said if I didn't like Vermont I could go back to Nork, and she gave it the old fashioned pronunciation, Newark, I suppose just to irritate me. As I recall, I did go back to Nork, that time, but that was a long time ago.

This time, anyway, I pushed her gently down into her chair, the worn old oak swivel chair in front of the disreputable old rolltop desk, with that battered old electric typewriter of her father's and her grandfather's. For all I know, her five-great-grandfather Elias Witherill started the *Argus* with it in 1847, two centuries ago.

"You say the WPA is bad," I said. I tapped the typewriter. "There's

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your real villain. And there—" pointing at the ancient offset press she printed the *Argus* on and waving at the framed, yellowed copy of Vol. 1, No. 1 of the *Argus*, hanging on the wall—and "there!"

It began with the typewriter, I informed her. The printing press came first, but typewriters really did the job.

Maybe the actual beginning was the manuscript of the ancient monks: impersonal and uniform. But handwriting was hardly widespread in the Dark Ages, so let's take it from the typewriter.

Handwriting was an individual thing. Transcribed speech; and speech is an individual's articulated thought. Printing is based on handwriting, but it's stylized and made uniform for mass production.

That leaves a big gap between script and print — the difference between personal mental process and a merely mechanical process of duplication.

Look at it this way. In the days when handwriting was general, a man believed a personal message if it came from someone he trusted. And he'd know it came from that person because he recognized the handwriting, just as he'd recognize the person's voice, or his face. The writing was, in effect, an extension of the reader's own senses or experience, into a distant situation.

Then with better communications came more handwritings, and more distant situations. Then the typewriter, and then the dictatyper. Everybody's writing was just like everybody else's, and there was a lot of it.

Everything was in type, even the identifying name at the end of a personal letter, the autograph ("Signature," Sara snigged) . . . signature, then. For a long time businessmen's letters had been signed by their stenographers anyway. ("Secretaries, blockhead," Sara muttered, and she sighed.)

The point is, I continued, that except for a few cases of eccentricity — I glanced at her belt pouch, with the pencil in it — handwriting had disappeared. The written word — the reader's distant experience—was in type: dictatype, teletype, phototype, printer's type . . . newspapers, books, advertising, business letters, memoranda, personal letters, everything.

Before, people had tended to believe most of what was handwritten, and almost nothing that was in type. With everything in type, they got tired of deciding which to believe and began to believe either every word, or none. It wasn't good.

It led to the Edict, and of course to the World Press Association and its relentless search for truth.

"Gah," said Sara. "Truth is an overrated commodity. Let's go upstairs and get ourselves something to eat."

II

Her voice was muffled coming from the jon. But I knew she was reading from a document she kept framed there, and I knew well what it said.

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The Edict

Be it enacted by the unanimous voice of these United Nations of America, Europe, Africa and Free Asia, in congress this 14th day of April, 1997 that, henceforth:

No person, group of persons, organization, or governing body of any town, city, state or nation existing under the articles of this federation, shall print, or cause to be printed, or knowingly permit to be printed, or disseminate or knowingly permit to be disseminated any word, phrase or work, excepting only certain scientific treaties of explicit speculative nature as hereinafter defined by statute, that is not both wholly and in part demonstrably true.

"Great Judah," I heard Sara say. "What a disaster!"

"Stop muttering and come out here," I shouted. "You said food."

"I'll be with you in a minute. I'm almost finished undressing." Since we weren't expecting company I had already hung up my coverall — a new though serviceable one of diaphragm-weave thermoplast, bought especially for Vermont and warranted for 30 degrees below.

With or without the chiton and hose she favored over coveralls, Sara was a handsome woman. Strong, straight and, I knew, a fit mother for our children. But right at the moment, she was angry at me all over again.

She strode to the foodbar. "You!" she said, chucking a handful of steakpaks into the infra, twisting the dial. "You and your Edict!" she said, hurling potatopaks into a pan of hot water and yelping when the water splashed on her thigh. "You and your stupid, buzzing, clicking, inhuman WPA!" she said, filling milkpaks with water, cramming them into holders and slapping them sloshing down on the table.

"You talk about type and belief and truth. Truth! You have the gall to keep on parroting those same old defenses about that electronic scrap heap you have the effrontery to call a — a Greeley! Elias Witherill thought Horace Greeley was a rotten newspaperman, but rotten or not, he was still too good to have that whining junkpile named after him.

"What does a tangle of wires know about newspapering. What does WPA know about writing a story? What do *you* know about news?"

"Now, Sara," I said.

"Don't now-sara me, dammit. You still fail utterly to realize that news is more than just what happened, when, where, to whom, how and why. It's what might still happen, even what might have happened otherwise or never did happen, if that's part of the story.

"The Edict forbids every bit of it!

"But most important, news is expressed — and this you simply cannot see — expressed in basic human terms, designed to arouse the basic human curiosity or sympathy that makes an abstract description palatable *to people*. If you like, it *tricks* people into informing themselves.

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The *Sun*, your wonderful *Sun*, sticks to facts and statistics, and make a *hurricane* dull. It doesn't tell about people, it lists numbers!

"Real news has, by God, Heart! Without it, a newspaper is just a list, a long, long list that . . . nobody . . . will . . . READ!"

"Okay," I said. "Okay! This is better?" I tramped over to a framed *Argus* front page down the wall from Vol. 1, No. 1, that was dated April 17, 1904. She started to protest, but I overrode her. "Listen to this," I said. And read from a story given prominent play on the page:

NEAR-DEATH . . . AND TRAGEDY

"WHERE'S TINKLE?"

HER FIRST QUESTION

Death's clammy hand brushed a golden-haired moppet Tuesday afternoon.

Gentlewomen swooned in the crowd that quickly gathered at the corner of South Main and Elm Streets, so near had tragedy come to that little girl, Irma Littlefield, aged four, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Adoniram Littlefield of 324 Elm Street, that afternoon. Men wept unashamedly when little Irma, lying crumpled in the dust, stirred her tiny limbs and opened eyes of deepest blue, even as her shrieking mother flew to the side of her baby.

Death had passed by Irma, yes. Yet the uncaring runaway freight wagon that had so nearly snuffed out her brief existence had dealt the child a blow even as cruel, more savage; perhaps as grievous a hurt as would have been the sweet baby's death to her stricken parent, sobbing now with the child's golden head in her lap.

For from Irma's ashen lips, cold still with the awful nearness of the Grim Reaper, the first faltering words were,

"Where's Tinkle, my little doggie?"

Tinkle, a curly-haired mongrel to the unseeing world, nothing to the insensible, crushing wheels of the now-distant freight wagon. Tinkle, more than a dog, more than a pet, more than it is given us in our wisdom to know, to that little child. A friend, confidante, companion in all her infant games and journey of the imagination.

"Where's Tinkle?" Alas, Irma..

"That's plenty of that," I told Sara "Is that what you mean by Heart? Is that what you mean by 'news'?

"It wouldn't even rate two lines in your own *Argus* today.

"But don't try to tell me that the major newspapers changed from that mawkish, overblown sentimentality about unimportant or nonexistent things. They just printed the same sort of drivel using governments and countries instead of people. They cluttered themselves up with portentous speculation and conflicting interpretation until the actual relation of real events was crowded off the page — because plain facts weren't

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exciting enough to sell newspapers!

"Granted, country people are curious about their neighbors, and have activities too small and numerous to make the *Sun*. That's why semi-controlled monthlies like the *Argus* exist. But for the important stuff, only the exact truth will do."

I thought a minute before going on. Why can't a civilization that will some day land on the moon, calm an angry woman? I started by pulling Sara, struggling, onto my lap.

"You think — hold still! — a Reporter doesn't have to know much," I told her. She nodded violent assent. "You think all he has to do, all day long, is sit by the Scoop and keep Flacks and psychos away. You think I just sit there while news goes in the Scoop and comes out the Fotofax slot.

"To some extent, you're right. WPA doesn't encourage heavy thought on the job — just that I be big enough and quick enough to keep some fool from hollering fake advertising plugs or obscenities or nonsense into the mouthpiece, or maybe smashing the Scoop the way some try to do.

"But I *think*. I take pleasure in thinking, in figuring things out. Sure, I keep it quiet, permanent Civil Service status or not. If I didn't keep my mouth shut I'd never have been promoted from Inaplis to WPA Center Nork.

"Sara, I am in charge of the No. One Scoop in the Northeast Region for the Greeley — all right, the Groves-Rudermann Eidetic Integrator. Top spot in the Guild, Sara! Because I keep my eyes open and my mouth shut, and I tend my Scoop."

"But all the while you're faithfully guarding that hole-in-the-wall, you're thinking big fat thoughts," she snarled. But she had nestled into a comfortable position in my lap.

"Faith and fat, your favorite shock words," I said. "Yes, I do think. I think the Edict was a good thing. I think the WPA is a good and necessary organization. And I think that Cybernetic Democracy is the best form of government that men have figured out yet."

"Speak for yourself," Sara muttered. "I don't like being told how to live by a pinball machine."

Don't hurl antiquities at me, I told her. Cybernetic Democracy and WPA are root and branch of the same tree. The Edict set up WPA, and WPA worked, and Congris came as a logical development, and it works. The voice came before the brain (Sara mumbled something about a Cheshire Cat, whatever that is) but the point is, now we have both.

Look, it surely wasn't good the way government was before. Stands to reason as long as men are making the laws, a lot of those laws are bound to be stupid, or unfair, or just plain corrupt — like the men that made them.

But electrons don't lie, and they can't be bought, and they don't make mistakes.

So in every community room throughout the UN, there are Sena-

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tors. Microphones linked direct by microwave to Congris, the biggest cybernetic machine in the world, buried deep in rock somewhere in the Midwest. All you or any other citizen has to do is clear your ID with the Page, there protecting his Senator just like I do my Scoop, and speak your mind.

That complaint, or suggestion or whatever it is, goes straight to Congris, and Congris tallies it. If enough people have said the same thing, maybe that call of yours is the one that tips the balance: a new general law may be made, an old one changed.

Why, don't you realize that if enough people asked Congris to abolish itself and bring back representative human government, it would? That directive was the first one programmed, even before the civil codes of a hundred thousand big and little governments were fed in, compiled and codified. But it'll never happen.

And if Congris sees it's got just a local matter, it passes your call down to the district level, and the same computer that settles everything from tax bills to traffic violations to murder may publish an ordinance — and that's that.

It's incorruptible, not like man-made law. It's impartial, it's just and impersonal. It's the greatest good for the greatest number, and as sure as 51 beats 49, there never was democracy purer than we've got now.

Sara! Wake up!

She sat up yawning, and stretched. "I, and my father before me, have been writing editorials against Congris for forty-two years. Since 2005," Sara informed me drowsily. "Why don't you tell me all about it?"

Then she sat up, eyes wide with interest. "You are blushing with anger clear down to your navel," she exclaimed. "I never knew you did that!"

"And you are flat clear down to yours," I snapped. The words I regretted immediately. They were atavistic, impulsive, and even untrue; a violation of ethics and my Reporter's code.

"I am not," she said with composure. "But I won't be petty again, so go on, I guess."

"Well," I mumbled, "all I was going to say is that if it works for government it works for news too."

She sat up very straight in my lap and sing-songed like a schoolgirl: "Where the objective of Cybernetic Democracy is justice impartially rendered, the objective of cybernetic journalism and of the World Press Association is truth impartially told. 'For you will be told the truth, and the truth will keep you secure.' Foof."

"Well, it's — it's true, dammit," I said. "You aren't, you of all people aren't, going to tell me that news isn't just as important as government!

"Without that Fotofax printer in every home and public cubeo set, how are people going to know what's going on, and what laws have been passed? And how well those laws are obeyed? Why, without the *Sun* we wouldn't have an informed public. We wouldn't have democracy at all!"

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"You," she said crisply, "are confusing news with the *Sun*. News is a description of events, presented with human intelligence in a manner to interest and stimulate other human intelligence. The *Sun* is whatever that monstrous washing-machine decides is proper to have happened, presented in a manner to interest no one except other washing-machines."

"Very glib," I replied. "But at least you will admit that news is important. Then doesn't it seem sensible to give it the same protection that government has? Protection from error and stupidity and corruption?"

"Protection?" she wailed. "It's so protected nobody sees it — nobody sees it — nobody cares!

"That hairy old item you read off the wall. You're right, I wouldn't use it today any more than the *Sun* would. But suppose Little Irma there had been killed by the runaway. We'd both print it . . . I'd tell the story, a story that might make just one more parent careful that day and save one more child. The *Sun* would put it in a list, something like:

DEATHS, Accidental
MILBRY — Littlefield
Irma: 4 dau/ M&M
Adoniram L-, 324 Elm,
struck by wagon Elm at S:Main.

". . . and that would be that for a little blonde-haired, blue-eyed, four-year-old statistic! Why, suppose. . ."

"Supposition!" I interrupted. "You can't waste time with supposition! People are entitled to facts. They get facts in the *Sun*. They know that every item in that sheet is written, checked and checked again by the special media circuits of Congris we call WPA. Those same cybernetic banks that make the laws, trace the lawbreakers, do the thousands of things that make our civilization possible, they filter, sift and sort the news as it comes in from the Scoops.

"A Fireman reports on a fire, a Policeman reports on a crime, a Doctor a death or a citizen any important event. Every bit goes to the Greeley and if it's important enough, comes out in the next regional, national or world *Sun*. All the Fireman or citizen or whatever has to do, is press his ID tag to the sensor, for identity, veracity and authority audit, and have a Second there for corroboration.

"It's the news, straight news, all the news that's important enough to print, and written so it can be understood . . ."

"By a washing-machine," Sara broke in. "Sterilized, deodorized, dehumanized news — and still it stinks."

"Dehumanized! Certainly it's dehumanized! There's none," I said emphatically, "of that so-called 'human element' about it! Why, the whole point is to eliminate human error, human prejudice, human partiality, human ignorance!"

Sara sat up suddenly, driving her rump right into the pit of my stomach. "Oh," she said, "I almost completely forgot. What do you want for Christmas?"

Torn between pain and exasperation, I believe I kept myself in check

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admirably. From clenched teeth I informed her I was intelligent enough not to exchange unwanted gifts of equal value, moral enough to abhor Crimmus. All I could ever want, I said, was not to be bludgeoned in the belly with a butt.

I asked her to please get up, and she did, cheerfully.

III

Driving down to Nork the next morning, I dropped off the feeder tramway onto the fast belt south. Hanging from the feeder hook, waiting for an open space in the line of cars, it occurred to me a lot of people were on the road, both Nork-bound and northbound to Montral.

"Crimmus shopping," I said aloud, remembering, and swore mildly at the slip. While the day — tomorrow, it was — still meant something to some, it's not the kind of rational deformity you generally talk about.

Sara would, of course.

But I long ago faced the fact that Sara's a romantic. As neuroses go, that's a mild one, and didn't even call automatically for correction. All that it meant was that she was restricted to the C Population Zones that she wouldn't leave anyway, and a little outside special tutoring in the Realities for our children.

It wouldn't even affect my job or Civil Service rating. Still, if Vermont were ever zoned Population B, there might be trouble. She wouldn't leave Milbry.

Oho, I thought to myself, locking onto the Nork belt and double-checking the destination coordinates, I am lapsing into speculation—risky ground, for a Reporter. The code expressly forbids speculation, and with reason.

Speculation uses an inadequate number of arbitrarily chosen half-truths to shape conflicting possibilities, all but one of which time must prove to be false. Truth is only what has already happened. Conjecture is a laboratory matter for trained scientists to dabble in, under laboratory controls. Judging from the scarcity of scientific news these days, conjecture wasn't working there either.

Having neatly boxed myself into an uninformed generality, I grimaced, took a dozer and slept all the way to Nork.

Back in my stag cubicle at the dorm, I fingered my chin in what must have been pure atavism; it wasn't even close to time for a depilatory booster. Sara — Sara, Sara, Sara — once urged me to skip the pill some month and grow a beard, a mustache or something, like her Four-Great-Grandfather Isaac, Elias Witherill's son. The one that was a war major, in 1861.

I told her it was an aberration for her to have our sort of relationship with a grandfather image, and besides a beard did mean body hair in general and that itched. She said, well, I could instead get a false beard, like Santa Claus, and then we had a really big argument about what sorts of vulgarity were amusing, and which were not.

That broke off our second engagement, I think it was. Yes, the second.

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Now she was pregnant, on purpose, we were going to get wed, and I had just seven minutes to get to work.

My Scoop is in the usual sound-proofed, glass-walled isolbooth you'll see anywhere in Nork. The fact that it is in a plaza at the 75th level and thus under the open sky, a thing that bothers a lot of Nork people, is to me more than mitigated by the view from the vestibule. You can see, beyond the Liberty Statue International Memorial floating in New York Bay over the former site of Times Square, to the Long Island shore at Mineola and up into Conicut.

Today there wasn't time to look around. I formally relieved Vern, the late-nightside Reporter, and had barely punched my ID against the time clock when the District Reporter's face came on the viewer for visual check.

"Reporter One-C Ben Marli, US-6044-230 988 368GN 0800/24 Deck 2047," I said. The face nodded, faded.

Vern was still there when the viewer went blank. Most of us punch in exactly on time and punch out exactly four hours later, to the minute. Vern always comes on early and leaves late because, I think, his father was convicted of advertising under the Edict, and Vern is still trying to clear the family number.

"Quiet night, Ben. Just one accident," he said. I was leafing through the little pile of dupes — simultypes of the stories that had gone into the Scoop, with the ibems of the Source and his or her Second — and was seeing this for myself, so I just grunted.

Then one, the accident he'd spoken of, brought me up sharp.

On the face it was a straight item: the Source, Retailer Mark Neman, US2109-590-412 663CC, a visitor to Nork, had told of an accident involving one Housewife Ela Brand in a store on the 24th level, unnamed, of course. She fell on an antique glass bowl, which broke and cut her neck severely. The store's security guard substantiated the story, adding that the woman had nearly bled to death from a severed carotid artery before arrival of the store doctor. He had been delayed by the nearly unheard-of circumstance of the birth of twins in the store's infirmary.

First aid by an unidentified passer-by saved the accident victim's life, according to both Source and Second.

The doctor was unable to perform as Second because, while the victim was physcially able to go on her way after normal treatment, she had had to be clinicked for "irrational grief reaction" over loss of the bowl she had fallen on. Even so, the novel injury, rare these days, would have made it a play story in *Sun* editions across the nation, at a quiet time like the end of the year.

"Vern, Vern," I said. "Don't you know a Plant when you hear one? Surely you should recognize a Flack's work, if anybody could," I told him. Maybe it was unkind to talk about Flacks, when his father had been one; but any time the truth hurts, it's the pain of healing.

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"It's a pretty elaborate plant, but phony as faith," I said more gently. "That bowl fairly screams 'Gift.' Are you forgetting tomorrow's Crimmus, and that all over the country Flacks are pulling tricks like this?"

Vern, pale, said defensively, "Ben, look. The Source's ID checked without a hitch. He's a retailer in Dals, Tex. The guard's cleared too. The doctor verified by phone, from the clinic. You going to tell me that a doctor would lie or be mistaken about an accident like that, or that it could be faked in a crowded store, or that any woman'd risk bleeding to death for Flack money?

"I know the Flacks are out in droves. But this has got to be a legitimate story."

"It's a phony," I said. "The gift is just too integral. Don't be slow to punch the button on a deal like this."

IV

It *was* a phony of course. Despite Vern's failure to signal for a double-check, the WPA had delayed publication and run the circuits. Similar but not identical stories had gone into Scoops in 14 major cities, all at the same time today; each involved a near death or disaster, with a reference to a recognizable gift that couldn't be edited out. In each case the Source was a retailer visiting that city — and yet the stores and 14 retailers matched up perfectly.

In our particular "accident," the woman turned out to be a clandestine actress—they had all virtually disappeared after the Edict, needless to say—hired for her ability to fall and fake injury convincingly. She hadn't cut herself on the glass, only burst a hidden capsule of her own blood drawn off weeks before. The actual gash in her throat was made with a shard of glass by the "unidentified passerby"—really the Flack himself — when he saw the store doctor coming. The artificially-stimulated birth of twins that had delayed the doctor, had also been part of the Plant.

The doctor was found innocent. The guard, only true victim of the plot, was cited as unobservant but not held for correction. The Flack, the actress, the mother of the twins and the visiting retailer were, before my shift was half over, sentenced for conspiracy to deceive and falsely advertise in violation of the Edict, as were the culprits in the 13 other Plants. Their conviction was the play story, all editions in the 10:00 hours *Sun*.

All that, to remind people about gifts, and Crimmus. The WPA had exposed the plot, and printed the truth about it as no human news-reporting agency could have.

Even so, I wondered, if, despite the Edict and WPA, the Flacks hadn't gotten their Crimmus reminder before the public, after all. I stared in at the Scoop.

Physically, the Scoop is just a short, thick tube projecting from a blank wall; it ends in a round orifice covered by a grille, and is adjustable to the height of the speaker. Below it is an ID sensor plate, and above it, the viewer and the preamble to the Edict.

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The Scoop isn't large. But it gives man a voice no man ever had before: it could bring his words almost instantly to men throughout the world. It is the ultimate in the communication that mankind has sought down from the dawning of intelligence. Only one condition must be met, and only one thing those words must, according to the Edict, be:

"... Wholly and in part demonstrably true."

Think about it a minute. In the earliest days, communication was between two men only. If the first lied, only two people, the liar and the victim, were affected. Later, as civilization developed through improved communication — more abstract lingual concepts, systems of writing, methods of transportation — a word could travel faster and farther, and affect more and more people. The numbers hearing a man's speech and being touched by his words grew at the same time larger and closer to him, as his methods of addressing them went farther and farther out.

Great truths were produced by closer collaboration, as communications improved. But with imperfect regulation, great lies went out too, magnified by the same communications. One man's lies could poison an entire nation, and afflict the entire world.

It had to stop and, after the Third War, the Edict stopped it.

Just as cybernetic democracy bought true justice to government, the incorruptible and infallible machines brought just truth to communication, through control of mass media.

Of course it meant the end of written and portrayed fiction; for who could tell when a fiction, faultily understood would be believed, and a lie derived?

Of course it meant the end of competitive advertising and, to a large extent, competing products. One depilatory is not truly, demonstrably better than another. No car is superior to another in appreciable degree. And no institution requiring false images of such superiority can contribute to a civilization facing reality. If a product can't be sold on the basis of true fact, it has no place in the market.

Of course it meant other necessary changes in the economy; for without predictions of mythical profits or hypothetical success, banned by the Edict, who would invest? What human could surely forecast profits or success? Congris now decides such matters, and the result has been a stable economy.

Of course it meant alteration of personal relationships. All too often the so-called "love" of one another was founded on deliberate deception, or self-delusion fostered by fiction. "Love" letters, and with them the extravagant posturings of romance, ceased almost to exist, through postal censorship under the Edict. All but known truth was eliminated from schoolbooks, to the detriment only of the romanticized, and thus probably false, past. Surrounded by fact, human relationships have become factual. Hypocrisy, deceit, exaggeration are against the law.

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Granted, the per capita ratio of marriages, and weddings once a desired child is to be born, have decreased. But so have the divorces, both overt and covert, that once resulted from disillusion.

In the same way, parents and children assess their true feelings toward each other and, sometimes, rearrange themselves — or on application are rearranged. It makes for a far more practical allotment, often, than the hit-or-miss distribution of children previously.

Life, freed from the phantoms and fairies inspired by spurious children's tales, by adult daydreams, deception and delusion, is less complex, more direct than it was 50 years ago. It permits a far greater attention to the details of present existence; for once you realize how little good it does to dwell on an unknowable future, the immediate and provable present becomes important indeed.

If sometimes this present seems to lack a luster that older people say they remember, at least no flaws have been concealed by that luster. At last mankind can see exactly what he is, and where he stands.

Myth, prediction, speculation, promise, aspiration, hope: these fog the mind with illusion and paralyze the hand with doubt. The present suffices for itself.

V.

All the wrong things were in the face of the man I saw approaching now, through the tube from the elevator. You know how you can spot the dreamers? I could see it on this one 50 yards away, and I swore, because it was almost time for my shift to end.

He came on, hurrying with that expression in his eyes, a little girl trotting after him. They were father and daughter. Both had the look, though he seemed a little old to have a young child.

He passed the outer gate well enough, fumbling his ID against the lockplate and fidgeting during the seconds it took for preliminary verification to come. The lock clicked and he burst in, pulling the girl after him.

"We wish to report . . ." he began. I waved at him to shut up. "Name, number and duty," I said. "That's the routine." Of course the information had typed out from the banks before he got in.

"Oh. I'm sorry." I think he really was. "My name is Karl Onlon, professor of elementary biology, downstairs." That meant he tended a teaching machine at the center midtown branch of the university. "Number . . . my number is —" and he peered at his ID "—ah, US1006-929 113 274CE."

The point of asking for name, number and duty is to let the Source cool down a bit. He had, a little, so I said, "Okay, what's your story?"

"We wish to report signs of the presence of a herd of small ruminant animals in Central Park Memorial Plaza," he said. He waved toward the patch of white-mottled brown about a kilometer away, where dirt and rocks and a whole lake had been raised to rooftop level for an open-air park. Naturally, that was done

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when pointless things were still being done.

"What you tell me doesn't matter as far as appearing in the *Sun* is concerned," I told him. "But I have to know details before I can pass you in to the Scoop. The World Press Association decides on the stories." He nodded. "You are the Source?"

"Ah . . . actually, no," Onlon said. "I'm the Second. My daughter Gini —" he'd been standing with his arm around the little girl, and squeezed her shoulder "— is the, uh, Source. But she is a very sensible person, and I will vouch for — Second — anything she tells you."

Truly, I was already getting a little uncomfortable with this pair. The girl hadn't said anything, but she stood looking grave and important, and something else too, up at her father. Open pride, it looked like. Yet sometimes she almost smiled. He was earnest enough, except when he looked down at her.

I was weighing all this while I listened with half an ear to the story. This wasn't a Flack, or a Flack's trick. That I was certain of. You can tell. Deviates don't come in father-daughter pairs, so it wasn't an obscenity kick. And this wasn't a Scoop-smash.

I didn't think it was a news story, either. But Onlon seemed quite convinced that this pack of animals that left the tracks was rare, not only in Nork but anywhere. The tracks were distinctive, he said. And the girl, whose voice matched her face, grave yet with a kind of . . . happiness in it, did seem sensible. So I passed them in, to the Scoop.

Odd, I thought of Sara as I did it.

"I don't think this will make the paper," I warned them. "Children don't make good Sources. And your being her father weakens the Second. This herd, or whatever it was, could have been a dog or rat pack. . . there still are some in Central Park. But the Greeley'll decide. Go on in."

As the glass door swung shut behind them, he held it and said, "They're early, you see." And I swear the little girl giggled.

I watched her reach up to the sensor plate with her ID.

They weren't in the Scoop cubicle long, for Ron Obrin, my relief, reached the top of the elevator just as the girl started to talk into the Scoop, and he was opening the vestibule door when the pair came out. Ron was, of course, on the dot of noon.

The father was talking to the girl as Ron checked in at the time clock. "There, Gini, I promised you, and we tried," I heard him say. She thanked me, still grave and almost smiling, and he thanked me, and they left. I was glad to see them go.

"Quiet morning, Ron," I said. That reminded me of Vern, and Vern's blunder, and suddenly that made me edgy. I went in to the Scoop and tore off the dupe of the Onlon report.

The first warning I had was the slug, "CHURCH," stamped at the end of their transmission on signal from the Greeley. It meant the Greeley had evaluated the transmission and referred it to the editorial level.

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And that was wrong, way wrong. Every trade has its vulgar and, some would say, irreverent catchwords. Actual churches had become pretty rare as Congris took over more and more direction of public life. You can depend on advice you get from a cybernetic system that doesn't stop eating if you stop asking. So as religion dwindled, in the WPA we came to call the Greeley's editorials "sermons," and the ratiocinating levels of the Greeley, "Church." It's rather juvenile, I suppose.

Still the Onlon transmission was slugged "CHURCH." I looked at the father's Second report, and saw why.

"THE STORY I TOLD TO GAIN ENTRANCE HERE WAS A JOKE," he had said. "THERE WERE NO TRACKS OF TINY REINDEER IN CENTRAL PARK MEMORIAL PLAZA . . . AT LEAST NONE WHOSE TRACKS I SAW . . .

PLEASE . . . WHOMEVER THIS MAY CONCERN . . . DO NOT BLAME THE REPORTER WHO LET US IN . . . HE IS TRAINED ONLY TO RECOGNIZE COLD TRUTH AND COLD LIES . . . AND HAS NO EXPERIENCE WITH JOKES . . . WHICH ARE NEITHER . . . I FULLY UNDERSTAND THAT . . . IN OUR SOCIETY . . . A JOKE IS A LIE AND A CRIME . . . I THINK THAT IS A TRUE CRIME . . . THANK YOU . . .

AND IME SORRY . . .

Bad, bad, bad for me. Beyond a possible editorial about these "jokes," the Church would ignore the matter. But the fact I had passed a lie would show on my performance audit, and it wouldn't look good; even so, the treatment I got from Civil Service would be a lot gentler than the things I was thinking about myself. I doubted that Onlon would even get more than a reprimand — he apparently meant no harm. He would be separated from the child, of course.

As for the girl's transmission, it was shocking and stupid. I jammed the dupe in my belt-pouch, and went out without a word to Ron, to start the trip to Sara and Vermont.

I was poor company when I got there. Sara tried every trick she knew to find out what the trouble was, for naturally I told her there was trouble. But I couldn't yet make myself tell her how I'd been duped, by a professor and a child.

Finally she dragged me off to the Milbry Community Room to, as she said, "dissolve my unwept tears in humanity's soothing sea." Knowing full well it was Crimmuseve didn't help me a bit.

As I feared, the gaiety of Crimmus was rank in the room: a lot of excited talk, snatches of humming. And even, when the Fotofax bell sounded, somebody said, "Ring out, wild bells," and a few people laughed out loud. Though most looked around guiltily.

I got up automatically to get our copies of the *Sun* as the cubeo announcer went into the WPA opening format:

"An informed people is a free people. Read your *Sun* and know the truth. Stand by now for an of-

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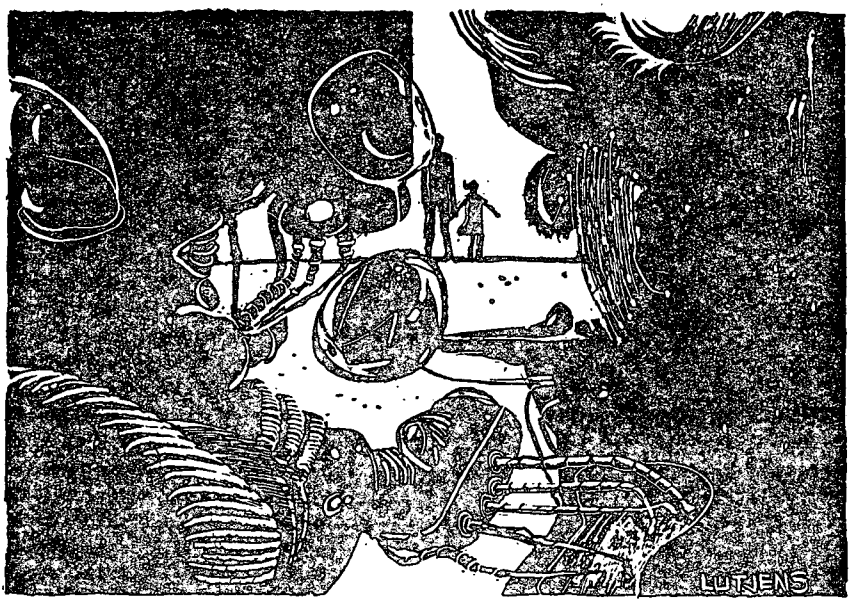

ficial synopsis of the day's happenings prepared by the World Press Association." That was the standard formula. But then he departed from standard, and it rattled him. I sat next to Sara and watched, interested.

"I have been directed," he said, "to call your full attention to the editorial on the front page of your *Sun.*" Good grief, I thought: Church! Surely not the Onlon thing! The announcer looked around him rather wildly, then blurted: "I now turn you over to the Orator, for a direct-voice proclamation of this editorial."

The vocal unit of Church, highest level of the WPA and the actual voice of Congris! The last time it spoke, 2 years ago, it was the Panasian War — this couldn't be the Onlon thing. The announcer's image faded from the cubeo prism and was replaced by a soft light, and an organ note as the local station engineers patched to the nationwide WPA circuit. Everyone in the room stared into the light, even Sara, waiting for the voice.

When it came, deep and resonant, I could feel it in my own chest. I could feel too the tension go out of Sara, and feel the sigh she and everyone else sighed, at the end of waiting.

The voice said:

"I speak to you about the question asked by a little girl. I answer her, but my answer is for all children, and women and men, and for all time . . ."

I almost shouted aloud, in sheer disbelief. It wasn't war, it wasn't even Onlon's joke — it was that silly thing from Onlon's daughter!

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I grabbed the dupe up out of my belt-pouch, and read along with that deep, throbbing voice:

"I am eight years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says, if you see it in the *Sun,* it's so. Please tell me the truth: is there a Santa Claus?"

And the voice read off the name the way the girl, with her grave little voice, would have formally given it: Virginia O'Hanlon. But what could the Church in all dignity say, to nonsense like that?

"Virginia," said the voice, "your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except they see . . ."

I was stunned. The broadcast is a hoax, I thought; a Flack's trick, or an incredible act of sabotage on an entire social system. Barely conscious of Sara sitting raptly beside me, I tried to make sense out of that deep organ note sounding through the roaring in my ears.

"Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus," it was saying. "He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist. . .How dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus! There would be no child-like faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished . . ."

I turned to Sara, tried to speak. She turned to me, eyes shining, and raised her fingertips to my mouth, then went back to the light, and the voice. Over the buzz I heard:

". . . there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived, could tear apart. Only faith, fancy, poetry, love, romance can push aside the curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond.

"Is it all real? Ah, Virginia, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding.

"No Santa Claus? Thank God, he lives! and lives forever! A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay, ten times ten thousand years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood."

The echoes of the voice seemed to ring even after the light had faded and left a roomful of people staring at the place where it had been; then looking up, with widening eyes, into the faces of others.

"I'll be damned," Sara whispered. "I will be damned! or just maybe . . . maybe not, after all . . ."

As I said, I don't know where it will end. Nobody does. **END**

THE GOVERNOR OF GLAVE

A Retief story by Keith Laumer

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The Creature Inside

BY JACK SHARKEY

ILLUSTRATED BY WOOD

The room was small, but it held a whole universe—and Norcriss had no place in it!

I

"How much did they tell you about the fix we're in?" said Dr. Alan Burgess to his visitor.

Lieutenant Jerry Norcriss shook his head. "They said you'd fill me in. They said it was urgent."

Burgess paused, lighted a cigarette, then belatedly offered one to Jerry, who declined. "Well," he said, interspersing his words with short nervous puffs of smoke, "about a year ago, I stumbled on a way to reverse the process of an electro-encephalograph, to play pre-recorded thoughts and experiences to a man's mind. You zoologists, with your Contact process for penetrating newly discovered fauna's minds, will be familiar with the process. Luckily for us."

Jerry eyed him. "Go on."

"My development involves an infinitely selective feedback. We give the subject a saturating dose of in-

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flowing concepts. His mind is free to choose among them and to link them. Take 'bigness, affluence and danger' for an instance. The subject puts them together and fleshes them out. He could experience a large, expensive fission bomb falling onto him, or he could be sacrificed to an immense golden idol, or — Or anything that his inner mind chose."

"I begin to understand," said Jerry "The overlay influences all the senses. The subject thinks he's *really* undergoing whatever he conjures up — and you use it for therapy, letting him work off his aggressions and frustrations in what seems to him an actual universe."

"Correct, except for the tense," said Alan Burgess. "I *was* doing that until Monday of this week." He leaned forward across the desk. "We screen the subjects carefully, because certain psychoses could be disastrous to the subject in my device. Paranoia, for instance. The man would be amid unutterable horrors, with danger on every side; he'd emerge a gibbering idiot, if he didn't die of heart failure first."

"Emerge?" asked Jerry, frowning. "I'd assumed you used a helmet, such as we do in Contact . . ."

Burgess sighed. "Unfortunately, I am paying the penalty of lone-wolf experimentation. I wish I'd had the sense to route the input to the brain through a helmet, but I didn't. Instead I installed the person in an observation room. The influencing factor was nutrition. Intravenous feedings wouldn't have served the purpose of the observer; sometimes the subject's choice of foodstuffs is significant. He had to be let move about, his mind in a make-believe world, but his body actually moving about a room we could see into. So — I had an atomic duplicator installed. The hospital got one last year for making radium, turning cancerous growths into normal flesh, regrowing bone and the like.

"Should the subject then grow hungry, the duplicator would be triggered by his conviction of eating. In his mind, he might be — hanging from a branch by his tail, for instance. The duplicator's production of bananas, coconuts or whatever would give us a further clue to his state of mind. You see?"

"So far, sound enough, Dr. Burgess," said Jerry. "So what went wrong? I assume something did, or I wouldn't be here."

"We made a terrible error. We tried observing a man named Anthony Mawson in our gadget. I'd diagnosed his case as simple inferiority complex. My fault. Wrong diagnosis. Mawson has megalomania, a gorgeous case of it . . . of course, he's not the first such case to fool psychiatrists. You see, his outward shyness, soft-spoken voice and general gawkishness is due to feeling superior to others, not the reverse. He feels smarter, stronger, braver, etcetera, than everybody else in creation — but he also feels that nobody knows it but himself. Hence his indrawing, his brooding, taciturn gentility."

Jerry Norciss prodded. "What happened with Mawson when you put him in your machine?"

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"I don't know," said Burgess. "No one's been able to see into the machine since he entered it on Monday."

"He couldn't have escaped?"

"No! I wish he had. Anthony Mawson is still in that room, in his own private universe, and we can't get him out of it. We've tried cutting the power to the machine; the opacity inside the room remains. We sent two men in after him. They never came out."

"How could he possibly?" asked Jerry.

Burgess shook his head. "We can only guess. Our theory is that he's used the duplicator to make the entire room self-sustaining. Normally we could wait till he runs out of material to feed the duplicator, but — we can't wait on the lives of those two men. Nor can we chance his expanding his universe."

Norcriss frowned. "Expanding it?"

Burgess nodded. "By, perhaps. feeding the duplicator with the room itself. With a pickaxe, he can start hewing down the very walls, or even have the duplicator build a robot that will take care of its need for material to build with. Against this development, we have surrounded the room completely with a force-shield, limiting his outward progress to two feet of concrete in any direction. But the room is approximately thirty feet square, and twenty feet high. With all that mass he could exist in there for years."

"And my job is to get him out," said Jerry.

"Yes. The government feels that a Contact specialist's the only kind of man to send into this madman's world. You men are used to extra-somatic experiences — and you have learned to live with danger without losing your heads."

"Well," said Jerry, getting up, "I guess that sums up the situation sufficiently."

Burgess nodded, sadly. "Any further briefing is useless. Impossible, really. I've told you the situation, and you can certainly imagine the danger. But as for the solution, well .... You'll just have to feel your way, and do whatever you think best."

Jerry paused beside Burgess at the door to the hall. "One thing, though, Doctor; when *I* get into the influence of the machine, what kind of universe will I be in? Mine or Mawson's?"

"I can only theorize on that," said Burgess. "My guess would be that you'll find both in there, one vying for supremacy over the other. This fight won't be man to man. It will be universe against universe."

II

There had been no sensation at all as Jerry stepped through the flat sheet of grayness in the doorway; no more physical awareness than a blind man might feel when passing through the beam of a powerful light. Perhaps there was a slight sensation of the mere presence of the energies that kept the opacity in existence — but that sensation, Jerry knew, was psychological, not actual.

"Although," he realized, as his

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world became an infinity of opalescent gray, "in this place, a psychological awareness will be no different from a genuine physical sensation. Better be careful what I think about in this psychokinetic fog . . ."

The thought was barely formulated when the grayness changed. It became moist against his flesh, and started swirling in tendrils about him. "Damn it, be *careful!*" he belatedly cautioned his mind. "Now the stuff *is* fog!" Ahead of him in the swirling mist a brighter-than-gray glow led his footsteps forward.

He found himself standing beneath an overhanging marquee. Its black undersurface was runneled with condensed moisture amid the garish naked bulbs that haloed the wet cement sidewalk.

A red-coated doorman, resplendent behind rows of bright brassy buttons, gave him a smile as he pulled open the door that led to the club. Jerry nodded and went inside.

Thick crimson carpet cushioned his footfalls as he moved cautiously through an empty lobby, then down a white marble staircase toward the ballroom. Dimly, he was aware that the band at the far end of the mammoth room was playing music. What song he didn't know until a chance chording reminded him of a popular song of the day . . . at which point that suddenly was the tune. The tables ringing the dance floor were covered with bright linen and shining silver. The tables were empty of patrons, however, until Jerry casually thought, "I should think business would be better —"

Suddenly a horde of laughing couples appeared in the chairs, with hurrying waiters bringing champagne, trays and menus to their guests.

The men wore tuxedos; the women were in evening dress. He looked suddenly at himself, and saw that his uniform was now the official dress uniform of the Space Corps. Before he could conquer it, his mind voiced a quick wish that he shouldn't be dining alone; and then a girl was rising from her place at a table beside the dance floor, hurrying to greet him, hands outstretched.

Her fingers were small and strong and warm. She smiled up at him. "Jerry, darling."

Despite her being only arm's length from him, he could not see her well at all. His impression was merely one of youth, loveliness and girl-ness. But then, as he tried to ascertain precisely what she looked like, hidden corners of his mind began to supply each detail an instant before his conscious quest for it and Jerry, in a few moments, was suddenly staggered with delighted shock.

Very few men are privileged to find a girl who lives up to all their dreams of perfection in a woman.

Hair as soft as cobweb, as fluffy as dancing clouds, as golden as flowing honey, cascaded down about a slender alabaster throat, and died in golden ripples on smooth white shoulders. Eyes the rich brown of raw chocolate gazed serenely at him from under red-gold brows and jet lashes, their patrician serenity permeated with a touch of twinkling

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impishness. Her lips were soft and not unlike berry-stained velvet, sweet and warm and tempting; her mouth generous and tilted at the corners into a smile of greeting — obviously the result of her subduing a frank laugh of joy at seeing him. Geometrically perfect teeth flashed white as porcelain between her lips. Her gown was a shimmering midnight blue, highlighted with random sprinkles of brightly coruscating gems.

Even as his lips parted to ask her name, Jerry knew it and spoke it softly. "Carol."

"Listen," she said softly, tilting her head toward where the band had begun a new song. Swift, urgent and rapturous, it floated through the room, surrounded the two of them, took possession of them. Then Carol was in his arms, and Jerry was dancing out onto the floor with her. The other couples were a blur of forgotten figures that swayed.

Jerry knew the melody. It was their song, their own private love song, the one that had been playing on the night when they both knew, suddenly, that there could be no one else for either of them but the other...

As they returned to their table, Jerry realized that Carol was now garbed in a white peasant blouse and bright flowered flaring skirt, and that her hair was drawn back at the temples to expose her ears, now adorned with golden hoops. The table was in a lattice-backed booth, covered with a red-and-white checkered cloth. The inner surface of the table held salt, pepper, grated cheese and breadsticks, matching cruets of pale olive oil and dark vinegar. The band was now a five-man gypsy ensemble.

"Remember the first time we came here, Jerry?" asked Carol, her eyes at once upon his face and distant, dreamy...

As she smiled, Jerry noticed with dull horror that one of her eyes was perceptibly lower than the other.

The teeth she flashed his way were mottled with brown stains. She took hold of his fingers with her own.

"Carol!" he said shakily, staring at the knuckly, red-raw hands that clutched at his. "What's happening?"

"Happening?" she said, her voice a raucous croak of amusement. "*Nothing's* happening! In fact, you're probably one of the dullest guys I ever got stuck with." She tossed her head petulantly. Coarse, straw-colored hair flipped away from her thick neck. Her breath was sour with wine and miasmic with garlic.

"Carol!" he cried.

"Don't whine!" she snapped, viciously. "I hate a guy who whines!" With that, she shoved out of the booth, and waddled toward the rear of the coffeehouse, one hand scratching at a bulge of flesh that overhung the too-tight girdle. Her black leotards were twisted and dull as she passed the flashing rainbow lights of the brassy jukebox.

Jerry shoved away from the table, overturning his coffee in its cracked china cup, and he wove his way through the reek and smoke toward the door through which she'd vanished.

When he got there, the door was

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a peeling poster on a bare brick wall, advertising some long-forgotten show. His fingers scrabbled on rough mortar for a moment. Then he turned and paced back to his cot, where he flopped on his back in the long shadows of the bars.

"Norcriss!" said the guard, coming into the cell. "This is it!" The brass uniform buttons flashed brightly.

Strong hands were lifting him from the cot, dragging him down a long corridor toward a steel door. As they got there, the door opened wide, and Jerry saw the gaping maw of hungry steel gears, while behind him a man's voice droned prayers.

Then, before the guard could shove Jerry forward into that waiting mechanical mouth, Jerry noticed the odd shimmer of grayness that lay between himself and the waiting teeth, and he remembered that he was in a world of illusion.

At precisely that moment he knew beyond a doubt that those waiting jaws were illusion in form only. An atomic duplicator does not have to chew its intake. It merely dissolves the atomic bonds with the rays that flash between its power plates on either side of the disruption platform. The waiting mouth and teeth were mere symbols in Jerry's mind of what was about to occur.

They were unreal — but they could be fatal.

He shut his eyes, shoved backward with his feet, and thought of Carol as he'd first glimpsed her.

When he opened his eyes once more, she was standing before him in her ballroom gown again, and the band was just beginning to play their song once more.

"Jerry," she said, taking his arm. "Dance with me."

"No. We're in danger here. Come on, I'll get your coat. We've got to go away quickly."

A spark of alarm showed briefly in her eyes. Then she nodded wordlessly and hurried up the marble staircase with him to the lobby. Jerry got her coat from the checkroom — a marvelous silvery fur that covered her from neck to waist — and then they were heading out into the fog together.

"Good evening to you, sir," said the doorman, eyes and buttons bright.

Jerry grunted and led Carol off down the street into the fog.

"Where are we going?" she asked, breathlessly trying to keep pace.

"Away, I hope," he said. Even their movement from the ballroom could be sheer illusion. Jerry tried moving from the club entrance in the exact reverse of the motion in which he'd first approached it, trying to achieve the real doorway that led from the experimental room into the antiseptic hospital corridor where Burgess waited. But the fog continued to be fog. It would not take on the form of that intangible gray shimmering that guarded the entrance to Anthony Mawson's megalomaniac universe.

"If I could only see where —" he began.

Then every tendril of fog was gone.

Before him lay the cold blackness of outer space, pinpointed with hard,

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unwinking stars. Jerry recoiled from the viewplate, shaken, and turned around to see Carol. Her eyes were wide and startled as she glanced about at the metal confines of the control cabin. Jerry had just time enough to think how incongruous she looked in her fur jacket and long blueblack gown . . . and then she was clothed in the neat gray uniform of the WASP, trim short-sleeved shirt and sharply creased shorts.

"Jerry," said Carol. She slipped her arm through his, staring at the infinite stars in the viewplate. "What are we running from?"

He tried to think, but could not remember. "There's — some danger behind us. We have to get away from it, Carol. It means complete destruction if we're caught."

Carol stared helplessly at the stars in the viewplate. "But where are we running to?"

Jerry shook his head. "Impossible to tell. Not without the help of a good astrogator. Out in space, stars shift and magnitudes change. I'm not even qualified to guess —"

"Sire," said the astrogator, handing a clipboard to Jerry, "we can reach any of these seven stars in a few hours. Just tell me where you'd prefer to go."

Jerry turned to the man, resplendent in his neat Space Corps uniform, jacket bright with brass buttons. When he tried to focus upon the man's features he could detect nothing.

"We'd better choose the quickest trip," Jerry said, after a moment's indecision. "No telling how much fuel we have left."

The astrogator nodded. "I'm afraid that's out of my department, all right, sir. But if *you'd* care to check the tanks?" Without waiting for a reply, the man turned and began to pick his way carefully toward the rear of the spaceship, stepping from girder to girder. The floor, Jerry noticed idly as he followed, was exposed to open space between the curving ribs of steel that formed the framework of the ship.

"Careful, now," he said, helping Carol along from one to the other. "That's vacuum out there. We don't want to fall through."

Ahead of Jerry, the implacable man with the brass buttons was nearly to the steel door masking the blast chamber where the components of fuel were mingled and ignited. Jerry, giddly aware of every hazardous step over the squares of star-speckled blackness, kept one hand on Carol's arm, the other on her chessboard.

"Don't spill any of the men!" she cautioned, as the diminutive plastic figures danced and rattled on the board. "I don't intend to search the whole cosmos for a pawn."

"Here you go, sir," said the politely insistent astrogator, opening the steel door. Before Jerry yawned an oval of intense white flame, the radiating heat crisping against his skin and hair.

"The fission rate," Jerry mumbled, consulting his wristwatch. "I've got to time it, or I won't be able to calculate the amount of fuel still in the bulkheads."

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"Count it by steps, sir," suggested the astrogator.

"One," said Jerry, stepping out toward that blinding coruscation of heat. "Two," he said, feeling carefully for the next girder.

Then the toe of his boot slipped from the metal, and he realized, with a horrible lancing of adrenalin through his abdomen, that he was falling out the opening between the girders. The only salvation would be a shove with his still-braced rear foot, but that would carry him directly into the inferno of burning fuel. An eternity of falling through icy vacuum against an instant of intolerable searing pain . . .

"The fire —" gasped Jerry, toppling in inexorable slow motion toward starry darkness, a cloud of twirling chess pieces orbiting about his head. "I've got to make it into the fire . . ."

He tensed the muscles of the laggard leg for the spring that would carry him to destruction, and then he saw that the chess pieces were shimmering gray, and the oval frame of the doorway to the flaming fuel was shimmering gray, and even what had seemed hot white burning was cold gray waiting mist, and with a yell of remembrance, Jerry clamped shut his eyes and let himself plunge downward into nothingness . . .

III

"Are you all right, Norcriss?" Jerry blinked slowly, then focused on the face of Dr. Alan Burgess. He found himself lying on a narrow, white-sheeted cart, in the corridor outside the room where all the trouble had begun. "Mawson" he said groggily. "Is he —?"

Burgess nodded wearily. "Still in there, in full control of his one-man universe. What happened, Norcriss? You came tumbling out that door like a wild man, clawing the air and yelling. Then you went into shock. You've been unconscious for two hours."

"I — I thought I was falling," Jerry admitted. "The last thing I remember is stepping through the open space between a spaceship's supporting girders."

"What open space?" said Burgess, frowning curiously.

Jerry shook his head. "There isn't any such thing. But something happens to logic in that room. It's like having a dream, Doctor. Things that would startle you in everyday life seem correct. Even familiar. But there's a kind of pattern to events. At first, I'm in my universe, and mostly in control. Then little fragments of my pseudo-reality start slipping, changing into other things. The changes seem perfectly normal to me. Then, all at once, the guy with the brass buttons turns up — and I've managed in the nick of time, twice, to realize that I was about to be sent or led between the disrupting plates of your atomic duplicator."

"The man with the brass buttons," Burgess said slowly. "Do you think it's Mawson?"

"Either him or a robot he's made to keep his machine fed." When Burgess scowled, Jerry shrugged and appended, "It is his machine, for all

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practical purposes. He's the boss of that hungry electronic monster, Doctor, however the hospital feels about it."

"This Carol. Is she a real woman, or a figment of your imagination, wishful thinking?"

"She's real enough," Jerry sighed. "She's the personal secretary of the entire Space zoology program. I take her out sometimes. There's nothing special between us."

"But you wish there were," said Burgess.

Jerry stared at him. "What makes you think that?"

Burgess tilted his head toward the room where Mawson still maintained control. "Your visions in there. You must think a lot of her. You can kid yourself consciously; but nearly all you underwent in there came straight from your subconscious. And a subconscious just doesn't know how to lie."

Jerry changed the subject, "What's our next move? How soon can I go back after Mawson?"

"You can't. Mawson's knowledge of this Carol can easily be turned to your disadvantage. He can use her to lead you to dissolution in there. No, it's much too risky. You're lucky you got out when you did."

"But what about Mawson, then?"

Burgess tried to look confident. He failed. "We can ring up your headquarters and ask for another man. Or, if worse comes to worse, we can partition off this part of the hospital, and just sit it out until Mawson runs out of atomic building blocks."

"Which may take years," Jerry reminded him.

Burgess turned his palms upward. "What else can we do?"

"Send me again," said Jerry. "I know the score pretty well, now. I know what to watch out for. I'm sure that with one more try I can get Mawson out of there."

"Sorry," Burgess said, shaking his head. "As a medical man, I cannot permit it. You've had a bad shock. We'll try someone else, if your outfit will send someone, and see what happens. If he fails, or if they won't supply us with any more men, then — well, you can try again in a few weeks, if you're still game. But not now."

"Doctor, in a few weeks, Mawson will be so well in control of that universe that he may find a way to block the entrance. Have you thought of that?"

"His universe is not a real one —" Burgess began.

"But that duplicator is real enough. It can make anything he decides he needs. And at any time he may get the bright idea of simply mounting his machine right at the entrance, so anyone stepping into that gray field will be powdered into atoms, instantly."

"That's true enough," admitted Burgess. "But my diagnosis still stands. For now, you are off this assignment. When I feel you're ready — assuming nothing else has succeeded meantime — I'll contact you at the base."

"How do you know I won't be off on some other planet by then?" asked Jerry bitterly.

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"I don't," said Burgess. "I hope you are not, but there isn't anything further I can do about it. I'm sorry."

"And what do I do in the meantime?"

Burgess grinned. "Call up this Carol and go out on the town."

Jerry shook his head at the last part. "No thanks. I prefer Carol to know nothing about it."

Burgess shrugged and gave it up. "All right, Norcriss. Rest here till you feel stronger, then you're free to go." Then he was striding off down the corridor.

After a bit, Jerry sat up cautiously, let the slight giddiness subside, then swung his legs off the side of the cart and got down.

Behind him, the door to Mawson's universe stood open on its wall of grayness. Jerry stared thoughtfully at it, then saw that the two internes who were guarding the opposite ends of this section of the hospital corridor were hesitantly half-starting toward him. Jerry knew he could be through that doorway and into the grayness before they got within ten feet of him...

IV

Then his shoulders slumped, and he turned and walked toward the elevators. Burgess was right. He felt worn out, and uninclined to make grandstand plays. Besides, he thought, thumbing the elevator button, it would be nice to see the *real* Carol again, after her nebulous pseudo-self. He wanted very much to put his arms around a girl who wouldn't suddenly turn into something horrible in his embrace.

The steel doors slid open before him, and the elevator boy leaned out to check the corridor for other passengers. "Down," he said. Jerry nodded and started into the elevator.

Then he hesitated, and looked back toward the room where Mawson reigned supreme, then back at the elevator boy. "Say," he said, uncertainly, "that's a strange outfit for an elevator attendant in a hospital. I'd have expected an orderly in an all-white getup."

The boy glanced down at his uniform, the bright blue pants, shined black shoes, and scarlet jacket bright with twin rows of brass buttons. "I suppose it is," he said. "But I don't usually run this elevator. I'm from the hotel next door. I'm just doing this while the regular guy takes his coffee break."

Jerry hesitated, then stepped toward the waiting elevator with its pale gray walls. And stopped again. His hand went to his forehead, bewilderedly. "There's something —" he said.

Then Carol was beside him, slipping her arm through his. "Come on, Jerry," she said urgently. "We'll be late for our date."

Jerry looked at her, then at the hotel corridor behind her, then again at the waiting elevator.

"I have the oddest feeling something's wrong," he said. "I — I don't remember coming over here for you."

"You didn't," she said promptly. "I came for you, Jerry. This is your hotel, remember? Doctor Burgess said you'd had a bad shock, but I didn't know how bad till now."

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"Shock?" said Jerry. "What shock What was bothering me?"

Carol smiled tightly. "Nothing. Nothing at all. Come on, Jerry. darling." Again she drew him toward the elevator.

"If I could only remember," he said, uneasily, on the brink of that open cube of bright grayness. Then his eyes focused upon the brass buttons fronting the boy's jacket, and at his own shadow as it passed across those glowing hemispheres. As the shadow crossed a button, the color would die, and the button would be dull crystal, and then glow bright and brassy again when the shadow had passed.

"Photoelectric cells!" said Jerry. "Light-sensitive cells. Those aren't buttons, they're eyes! Multiple robot eyes!" He staggered away from the boy. Carol stopped him.

The elevator boy, suddenly half again Jerry's height, was towering over him, long steel arms extending like hooked telescopes toward him. "Get in, Jerry, get *in!*" cried Carol, struggling to push him forward toward those invincible metal clamps.

In a fury of fear, Jerry fought her, grappled with her, twisted to avoid those extending robot hands that would drag him to destruction. And suddenly Carol was screaming his name, and her eyes were pools of terror and betrayal, and the leaping metal fingers had buried themselves in the soft flesh of her shoulders and dragged her back into grayness.

Incredible energies came alive about her, and then there was only a shimmer of dusty crystalline winds, and she was gone.

Jerry found himself standing before the still-warm plates of the atomic duplicator, in the room where Mawson had had his short-lived universe. Beside the machine, a squat cubic box dangled limp steel arms, its rows of photo-electric cells losing their golden glow.

And then, as Burgess came hurrying in through the door, he toppled over in a dead faint.

"So there is no such person as Carol?" said Burgess, standing at the foot of the hospital bed. "She was only the figment of your imagination?"

"Yes," said Jerry dully. "And all along, it was Mawson I was really with. He was clever, all right. She was certainly the last occupant of that crazy place I was likely to attack. If he had not tried attacking me himself—I might be atom dust by now. A little longer, and she—he, I mean—might have *talked* me into that elevator."

"Well," said Burgess, "I'm sorry this thing ended with Mawson's dissolution, but that can't be helped. You did your job well, Lieutenant."

"Thanks," said Jerry, expressionlessly.

"To come so near death so many times—" Burgess shuddered. "You have a remarkable constitution, not to have cracked under such a strain. Lieutenant, you're a lucky man."

And Jerry, his mind still filled with a vision of golden hair, soft brown eyes and warm, eager lips, could only echo wearily, "Very lucky."

END

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THE GOD-PLLLNK

BY JEROME BIXBY

Astronauts and cosmonauts! When you finally reach Mars, please be very careful what you look like!

In the shadows of a crater-wall on Phobos, moon of Mars, Grg and Yrl waited to greet the God.

If the God continued its present rate of approach, it would land within moments.

Grg and Yrl had journeyed all night, with their eyes on that distant glinting speck in the sky. Over cold-crusted sand dunes and jagged crater walls they had flowed, crept, bounded, oozed, toward the spot where the God must land if its course held true.

Grg was a Fsgh, which is the equivalent of High Priest, Yrl was a Ffssgghh, or Much Higher Priest. The best wishes of their people had gone with them on their tremendous mission.

Now, at the place, they trembled in every tentacle as they peered upward. The rust-red orb of Mars rode the black horizon.

Mars was, as Grg and Yrl had learned from their Elders and now taught their Youngers, the stern Seeing-All Eye of It Who Was the Universe.

From that great Eye, a day ago, had sprung a shining Messenger, an Emissary, a God that must be coming on a purposeful visit.

It had been detected at the half-

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way point of its trip. But there could be no doubt regarding its origin, its nature, its destination —

For, in the matter of form, the God was a close replica of Grg and Yrl — of all the creatures of their race! It was octopidal, with sinewy double tentacles, and a thinking trunk, and a reproduction pouch!

The only significant difference was that the God gleamed mysteriously, as if its angular, hard-line representation of normal form were cast in shining stone. As it flew it reflected starlight — and the red glow of the Universal Eye behind it — from its sleek surfaces.

Grg and Yrl blinked their own dull-surfaced, astronomically far-sighted, rust-red eyes at each other in supreme excitement and anticipation.

What would the God tell them? What would it reveal? Would it divulge the Cosmic Secret? Would it tell them the place and destiny of their lowly race? Had it come to punish them for not being good enough, for over-reproducing, for worshipping improperly?

From a selfish standpoint, it might even tell them how to get rid of the *plllnk* — a subject of constant prayer.

How smoothly it flew! While Grg and Yrl and their people could bound about with a great agility in Phobos' light gravity, they could not *fly*.

"How wonderful it would be to fly," said Yrl.

"Perhaps," said Grg, "we have been found ready to be taught!"

Then Grg twitched as a *plllnk* bit him, just under the front left double-tentacle. He combed the light fur there, found the *plllnk*, and shredded it, casting the pieces roundabout so that no two of them might combine to form another *plllnk*.

How wonderful it would be also if the God could tell them how to get rid of the itching, crawling, parasitic *plllnk*, whose bite, in sufficient numbers, was often fatal! . . .

The God began to land.

It shot red flame downward from its mouth, on the underside of its gleaming body. Red flickers and sharp-edged black shadows danced about the two who waited below. They shrank back, fearful that the display might be a disapproving communication — yet they held their ground, knowing they had lived good lives and deserved no condemnation on any score they could imagine.

The God lowered, on its belching tongue of flame — the flame that seemed a tiny part, a sliver, of the Universal Eye that Watched.

Strange marks were on the side of the God's body. They were: 1st MARS EXPEDITION - U. S. SPACE FORCE - PLANET-TO-SATELLITE CREWBOAT NO. 2.

The last few moments of the God's descent were quite rapid. Simultaneously, the darting red flames seemed to lessen in intensity and length. Then, at the second of impact, they brightened again to previous power — but too late. The impact was hard.

Grg and Yrl gasped as one of the God's double-tentacles buckled, crumpled, with a glinting of shiny-

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hard material. The flames stopped.

The God, unable to remain erect with its injury, slowly toppled. Its body thudded silently, stirring pumice dust. It was motionless.

Grg and Yrl stared at each other.

Was the God fatally injured? Dying? Dead? (For a broken tentacle meant that fluids would seep out, and soon the dry-death would occur.)

The God stirred.

It braced two sets of tentacles against the ground, as if trying to push itself erect. The effort was not successful. Again it was motionless. The two double-tentacles remained outstretched, however — and they pointed at the shadows where Grg and Yrl waited and watched.

Grg and Yrl sighed in relief.

The God had assumed conversation-position.

It must have healed its broken tentacle — truly a God! Soon it would be as good as new; for otherwise, agony would forbid conversation.

It was ready to address them. Now.

This was the greatest moment of Grg's and Yrl's lives.

They waited for the God to speak.

It was silent.

A long time passed. The God remained motionless, though in conversation-position, and silent. A *very* long time passed.

Then a tiny hole appeared in the God's side. It grew larger — larger — and then it stopped growing larger.

Something appeared at the hole. It paused, then dropped to the surface of Phobos, where it began to crawl about.

It bore considerable resemblance to a *plllnk*, except for its shiny-wrinkled grey skin (*plllnks* were purple.) And this thing was huge— *Huge*. It was one-fifth the size of the God's body.

Caught by horror, and fearing the worst, Grg and Yrl waited for the God to speak.

(*Damn,* John Cotter was thinking. *That was a neat bit of sloppiness, that landing. . .Carruthers will chew me out and in again!* Pause: *Holy cats, I hope the radio isn't busted, or I'll have a helluva wait before they follow up and find me! . . .*)

The God was dead.

Killed by the giant *plllnk* —a scourge from which, evidently, even the Gods were not spared. The huge *plllnk,* even now creeping around — wrinkle-skinned and detestable, its coloration the same as the God's; the most loathsome sight imaginable . . . a god-*plllnk!*

Grg and Yrl moved into view, from the shadows of the crater wall. Their thinking trunks tingled with misery, sorrow, bitter anger and disappointment.

The *plllnk* stopped, having sensed them. Then it darted for the hole it had eaten in the God.

Yrl moved to intercept it. The *plllnk* changed course and headed swiftly up a sand dune. With a great bound, impelled by outrage, Yrl was upon it.

While Grg touched tentacles with the dead God, in reverent mourning, in terrible sorrow, in loss, in

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supplication, Yrl shredded the god-*plllnk*.

Two days later, a second God was detected. It silently circled Phobos from the Universal Eye.

It did not land. It silently circled Phobos, and then returned to the Eye.

Within the day, it was back, in the company of eleven other Gods. They landed. Joyfully, mortals went forth to meet them.

It was quite a battle while it lasted.

Joy quickly ended, as the Gods died one by one, each of them showing the holes eaten in their sides by the insatiable *plllnks*.

Likewise, eventually, died all the *plllnks*, which presumably had killed the Gods. They fought with strange white flares and crackling blue flashes, which only tickled the hides of the faithful. Then they were shredded.

Religious beliefs on Phobos underwent certain basic changes. Such as: the Gods, or at least their Messengers, were known not to be immoral.

Nor were the special variety of *plllnk* which afflicted them . . .

On Earth, twenty years afterward, word is anxiously awaited of the 4th Mars Expedition. END

★★★

GOODLIFE

BY FRED SABERHAGEN

ILLUSTRATED BY COWELS

The starship was old as time, relic of a race of warriors who left it one task—destroy Man and all his works!

"It's only a machine, Hemphill," said the dying man in a small voice. Hemphill, drifting weightless in near-darkness, heard him with only faint contempt and pity. Let the wretch go out timidly, forgiving the universe everything, if he found the going-out easier that way!

Hemphill kept on staring out through the port, at the dark crenelated shape that blotted out so many of the stars.

There was probably just this one compartment of the passenger ship left livable, with three people on it, and the air whining out in steady leaks that would soon exhaust the emergency tanks. The ship was a wreck, torn and beaten, yet Hemphill's view of the enemy was steady. It must be a force of the enemy's that kept the wreck from spinning.

Now the young woman, another passenger, came drifting across the compartment to touch Hemphill on the arm. He thought her name was Maria something.

"Listen," she began. "Do you think we might—"

In her voice there was no despair, but the tone of planning; and so Hemphill had begun to listen to her. But she was interrupted.

The very walls of the cabin reverberated, driven like speaker diaphragms through the power of the

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enemy forcefield that still gripped the butchered hull. The voice of the berserker machine came:

"You who can still hear me, live on. I plan to spare you. I am sending a boat to save you from death."

The voice changed tones from word to word, being fragments of the voices of human prisoners the machine had taken and used. It was made of bits of human emotion sorted and fixed, like butterflies on pins. Hemphill was sick with frustrated rage. He had never heard a berserker's voice in reality before, but still it was familiar as an old nightmare. He could feel the woman's hand pull away from his arm, and then he saw that in his rage he had raised both his hands to be claws, then fists that almost smashed themselves against the port. The thing, the damned thing wanted to take him inside it! Of all people in space it wanted to make him prisoner!

A plan rose instantly in his mind and flowed smoothly into action; he spun away from the port. There were warheads, for small defensive missiles, here in this compartment. He remembered seeing them.

The other surviving man, a ship's officer, dying slowly, bleeding through his uniform tatters, saw what Hemphill was doing in the wreckage, and drifted in front of him interferingly.

"You can't do that . . . you'll only destroy the boat it sends . . . if it lets you do that much . . . there may be other people . . . still alive here . . ."

The man's face had been upside down before Hemphill as the two of them drifted. As their movement let them see each other in normal position, the wounded man stopped talking, gave up and rotated himself away, drifting inertly as if already dead.

Hemphill could not hope to manage a whole warhead, but he could extract the chemical-explosive detonator, of a size to carry under one arm. All passengers had put on emergency spacesuits when the unequal battle had begun; now he found himself an extra air tank, and some officer's laser pistol, which he stuck in a loop of his suit's belt.

The girl approached him again. He watched her warily.

"Do it," she said with quiet conviction, while the three of them spun slowly in the near darkness, and the air leaks whined. "Do it. The loss of a boat will weaken it, a little, for the next fight. And we here have no chance anyway."

"Yes," He nodded approvingly. This girl understood what was important: To hurt a berserker, to smash, burn, destroy, to kill it finally. Nothing else mattered very much.

He pointed to the wounded mate, and whispered: "Don't let him give me away." She nodded silently. It might hear them talking. If it could speak through these walls, it could be listening.

"A boat's coming," said the wounded man, in a calm and distant voice.

"Goodlife!" called the machine voice cracking between syllables, as always.

"Here!" He woke up with a start,

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and got quickly to his feet. He had been dozing almost under the dripping end of a drinking-water pipe.

"Goodlife!" There were no speakers or scanners in this little compartment; the call came from some distance away.

"Here!" He ran toward the call, his feet shuffling and thumping on metal. He had dozed off, being tired. Even though the battle had been a little one, there had been extra tasks for him, servicing and directing the commensal machines that roamed the endless ducts and corridors repairing damage. It was small help he could give, he knew.

Now his head and neck bore sore spots from the helmet he had had to wear; and his body was chafed in places from the unaccustomed covering he had to put on it when a battle came. This time, happily, there had been no battle damage at all.

He came to the flat glass eye of a scanner, and shuffled to a stop, waiting.

"Goodlife, the perverted machine has been destroyed, and the few badlives left are helpless."

"Yes!" He jiggled his body up and down in happiness.

"I remind you, life is evil," said the voice of the machine.

"Evil is life, I am Goodlife!" he said quickly, ceasing his jiggling. He did not think punishment impended, but he wanted to be sure.

"Yes. Like your parents before you, you have been useful. Now I plan to bring other humans inside myself, to study them closely. Your next use will be with them, in my experiments. I remind you, they are badlife. We must be careful."

"Badlife." He knew they were creatures shaped like himself, existing in the world beyond the machine. They caused the shudders and shocks and damage that made up a battle. "Badlife — here." It was a chilling thought. He raised his own hands and looked at them, then turned his attention up and down the passage in which he stood, trying to visualize the badlife become real before him.

"Go now to the medical room," said the machine. "You must be immunized against disease before you approach the badlife."

Hemphill made his way from one ruined compartment to another, until he found a gash in the outer hull that was plugged nearly shut. While he wrenched on the obstructing material, he heard the clanging arrival of the berserker's boat, come for prisoners. He pulled harder, the obstruction gave, and he was blown out into space.

Around the great wreck were hundreds of pieces of flotsam, held near by tenuous magnetism or perhaps by the berserker's forcefields. Hemphill found that his suit worked well enough. With its tiny jet he moved around the shattered hull to where the boat had come to rest.

The dark blot of the berserker machine came into view against the starfields of deep space, battlemented like a fortified city of old, and far larger than any such city had ever been.

He could see that the berserker's boat had somehow found the right

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compartment and clamped itself to the wrecked hull. It would be gathering in Maria and the wounded man. Fingers on the plunger that would set off his bomb, Hemphill drifted closer.

On the brink of death, it annoyed him that he would never know with certainty that the boat was destroyed. And it was such a trifling blow to strike, such a small revenge.

Still drifting closer, holding the plunger ready, he saw the puff of decompressed air-moisture as the boat disconnected itself from the hull. The invisible forcefields of the berserker surged, tugging at the boat, at Hemphill, at bits of wreckage within yards of the boat.

He managed to clamp himself to the boat before it was pulled away from him. He thought he had an hour's air in his suit tank, more than he would need.

The berserker pulled him toward itself.

II

The berserkers were relics of some ancient galactic war, some internecine struggle between unheard of races. They were machines set to seek out and destroy life, and each of them bore weapons that could sterilize an Earth-sized planet in two or three days.

Earthmen had spread out among the stars of a little section of an arm of the galactic spiral. Now they reeled back under the emotionless assault of the machines; planets and whole systems were depopulated.

Men fought back when they could. The passenger ship, intercepted far from help, had had no chance; but three or four warships could circle a berserker machine like wolves around a bear, could match missiles and computer speeds with it for long minutes, and — sometimes —could win. For the enemy was old, and damaged by warfare through unknown centuries and systems. Possibly many of them had been destroyed before their swarm descended upon Earthmen. The machines surviving had learned, as machines can learn, to avoid tactical error, and to never forgive the mistakes of an opponent. Their basic built-in order was the destruction of all life encountered. But each machine's strategic schemes were unpredictable, being controlled by the random atomic disintegrations of some long-lived radioactive isotope, buried in the center of the mechanism.

Hemphill's mind hung over the brink of death, as his fingers held the plunger of his bomb. The night-colored enemy was death in his mind; old as a meteorite, a hundred miles or more around its bulging middle. The black scarred surface of it hurtled closer in the unreal starlight, becoming a planet toward which the boat fell.

Hemphill still clung to the boat when it was pulled into an opening that could have accommodated many ships. The size and power of the berserker were all around the man, enough to overwhelm hate and courage alike.

His little bomb was a pointless joke. When the boat touched at a

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dark internal dock, Hemphill leaped into it and scrambled to find a hiding place.

As he cowered on a shadowed ledge of metal, his hand wanted to fire the bomb, simply to bring death and escape. He forced his hand to be still. He forced himself to watch while the two human prisoners were sucked from the boat through a pulsing transparent tube that passed through a bulkhead. Not knowing what he meant to accomplish, he pushed himself in the direction of the tube. He glided through the dark enormous cavern almost weightlessly; the berserker's mass was enough to give it a small natural gravity of its own.

Within ten minutes he came upon an unmistakable airlock. It seemed to have been cut with a surrounding section of hull from some Earth warship, and set into the bulkhead.

Inside an airlock would be as good a place for a bomb as he was likely to find. He got the outer door open and went in, apparently without triggering any alarms. If he destroyed himself here, he would deprive the berserker of — what? Why should it need an airlock at all?

Not for prisoners, thought Hemphill, if it sucks them in through a tube. Hardly an entrance built for enemies. He tested the air in the lock, and opened his helmet. For air-breathing friends, the size of men? That was a contradiction. Everything that lived and breathed must be a berserker's enemy — except, of course, the unknown beings who had sometime built it, and loosed it to do what damage it might.

It was thought they were extinct, or unreachably distant in space and time. No defeated and boarded berserker had been found to carry a crew, or to have a place or purpose for a living crew.

The inner door of the lock opened and artificial gravity came on. Hemphill walked into a narrow and badly lighted passage, his fingers ready on the plunger.

"Go in, Goodlife," said the machine. "Look closely at each of them."

Goodlife made an uncertain sound in his throat, like a servomotor starting and stopping. He was gripped by a feeling resembling hunger, or the fear of punishment — because he was going to see life forms directly now, not as old images on a stage. Knowing the reason for the unpleasant feeling did not help. He stood hesitating outside the door of the room where the badlife was being kept. He had put on his suit again, as the machine had ordered. The suit would protect him if the badlife tried to damage him.

"Go in," the machine repeated.

"Maybe I'd better not," Goodlife said in misery, remembering to speak well and clearly. Punishment was always less likely when he did.

"Punish, punish," said the voice.

When it said the word twice, punishment was very near. As if already feeling in his bones the wrenching pain-that-left-no-damage, he opened the door quickly and stepped in.

He lay on the floor, bloody and damaged, in strange ragged suiting. And at the same time, he was still

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in the doorway. His own shape was on the floor, the same human form he knew, but now seen entirely from outside. More than an image, far more, it was himself now bi-located. There, here, himself, not himself —

Goodlife fell back against the door. He raised his arm and tried to bite it, forgetting his suit. He pounded his suited arms violently together, until there was bruised pain enough to nail him to himself where he stood.

Slowly, the terror subsided. Gradually his intellect could explain it and master it. This is me, here, here in the doorway. That, *there*, on the floor — that is another life. Another body, corroded like me with vitality. One far worse than I. That one on the floor is badlife.

Maria Juarez had prayed continuously for a long time, her eyes closed. Cold impersonal grippers had moved her this way and that. Her weight had come back, and there was air to breathe when her helmet and her suit had been carefully removed. She opened her eyes and struggled when the grippers began to remove her inner coverall; she saw that she was in a low-ceilinged room, surrounded by man-sized machines of various shapes. When she struggled they paused briefly; then gave up undressing her, chained her to the wall by one ankle, and glided away. The dying mate had been dropped at the other end of the room, as if not worth the trouble of further handling.

The man with cold dead eyes, Hemphill, had tried to make a bomb, and failed. Now there would probably be no quick end to life —

When she heard the door operate she opened her eyes again, to watch without comprehension while the bearded young man in the ancient spacesuit went through senseless contortions in the doorway, and finally came forward to stand staring down at the dying man on the floor. The visitor's fingers moved with speed and precision when he raised his hands to the fasteners of his helmet; but the helmet's removal revealed ragged hair and beard framing an idiot's slack face.

He set the helmet down, then scratched and rubbed his hairy head, never taking his eyes from the man on the floor. He had not yet looked once at Maria, and she could look nowhere but at him. She had never seen a face so blank on a living person. This was what happened to a berserker's prisoner!

And yet — and yet Maria had seen the brainwashed, ex-criminals on her own planet. She felt this man was something more — or something less.

The bearded man knelt beside the mate, with an air of hesitation, and reached out to touch him. The dying man stirred feebly, and looked up without comprehension. The floor under him was wet with blood.

The stranger took the mate's limp arm and bent it back and forth, as if interested in the articulation of the human elbow. The mate groaned and struggled feebly. The stranger suddenly shot out his metal-gauntleted hands and seized the dying man by the throat.

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Maria could not move or turn her eyes away, though the whole room seemed to spin slowly, then faster and faster, around the focus of those armored hands.

The bearded man released his grip and stood erect, still watching the body at his feet.

"Turned off," he said distinctly.

Perhaps she moved. For whatever reason, the bearded man raised his sleep-walker's face to look at her. He did not meet her eyes, or avoid them. His eye movements were quick and alert, but the muscles of his face just hung there under the skin. He came toward her.

Why, he's young, she thought. Hardly more than a boy. She backed against the wall and waited, standing. Women were not brought up to faint on her planet. Somehow, the closer he came, the less she feared him. But if he had smiled once she would have screamed, on and on.

He stood before her, and reached out one hand to touch her face, her hair, her body. She stood still; she felt no lust in him, no meanness and no kindness. It was as if he radiated an emptiness.

"Not images," said the young man as if to himself. Then another word, sounding like: "Badlife."

Almost Maria dared to speak to him. The strangled man lay on the deck a few yards away.

The young man turned and shuffled deliberately away. She had never seen anyone who walked just like him. He picked up his helmet and went out the door without looking back.

A pipe streamed water into one corner of her little space, where it gurgled away through a hole in the floor. The gravity seemed to be set at about Earth level. Maria sat leaning against the wall, praying and listening to her heart pound. It almost stopped when the door opened again; only a machine entered, to bring her a large cake of pink and green stuff that seemed to be food. The machine walked around the dead man on its way out.

She had eaten a little of the cake when the door opened again, very slightly at first, then enough for a man to step quickly in. It was Hemphill, the cold-eyed one from the ship, leaning a bit to one side as if dragged down by the weight of the little bomb he still carried under his arm. After a quick look around he shut the door behind him and crossed the room to her, hardly glancing down as he stepped over the body of the mate.

"How many of them are there?" Hemphill whispered, bending over her. She had remained seated on the floor, too surprised to move or speak.

"Who?" she finally managed.

He jerked his head impatiently. "Them. The ones who live here inside *it*, and serve it. I saw one of them coming out of the room, when I was out in the passage. It's fixed up a lot of breathing space for them."

He showed Maria how the bomb could be made to explode, and gave it to her to hold, while he began to burn through her chain with the laser pistol. They exchanged informa-

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tion on what had happened. She did not think she would ever be able to pull the plunger and kill herself, but she did not tell that to Hemphill.

III

Just as they stepped out of the prison room. Hemphill had a bad moment when three machines rolled toward them from around a corner. But the things ignored the two frozen humans and rolled silently past them, going on out of sight.

He turned to Maria with an exultant whisper: "The damned thing is three-quarters blind, here inside its own skin!"

She only waited, watching him with frightened eyes.

With the beginning of hope, a vague plan was forming in his mind. He led her on, saying: "Now we'll see about that man. Or men." Was it too good to be true, that there was only one of them?

The corridors were badly lit, with uneven jogs and steps in them. Carelessly built concessions to life, he thought. He moved in the direction he had seen the man take.

After a few minutes of cautious advance, Hemphill heard the shuffling footsteps of one person ahead, coming nearer. He handed the bomb to Maria again, and pressed her behind him. They waited in a dark niche.

The footsteps approached with careless speed, a vague shadow bobbing ahead of them. The shaggy head swung so abruptly into view that Hemphill's metal-fisted swing was almost too late. The blow only grazed the back of the skull; the man yelped and staggered off balance and fell down. He was wearing an old-model spacesuit, with no helmet.

Hemphill crouched over him, shoving the laser pistol almost into his face. "Make a sound and I'll kill you. Where are the others?"

The face looking up at Hemphill was stunned — worse than stunned. It seemed more dead than alive, though the eyes moved alertly enough from Hemphill to Maria and back, disregarding the gun.

"He's the same one," Maria whispered.

"Where are your friends?" Hemphill asked.

The man felt the back of his head, where he had been hit. "Damage," he said tonelessly, as if to himself. Then he reached up for the pistol, so calmly and steadily that he was nearly able to touch it.

Hemphill jumped back a step, and barely kept himself from firing. "Sit still or I'll kill you! Now tell me who you are, and how many others are here."

The man's putty face showed nothing. He said: "Your speech is steady in tone from word to word, not like that of the machine. You hold a killing tool there. Give it to me, and I will destroy you and — that one."

It seemed this man was only a brainwashed ruin, instead of an unspeakable traitor. Now what use could be made of him? Hemphill moved back another step, slowly lowering the pistol.

Maria spoke to their prisoner.

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"Where are you from? What planet?

A blank stare.

She repeated the question in a couple of other languages, with no better result, then returned to the universal Loglan of Earth's spacemen and colonists.

"Your home. Where were you born?"

"From the birth tank." Sometimes the tones of the man's voice shifted like the berserker's, as if he was a fearful comedian mocking it.

Hemphill gave an unstable laugh. "From a birth tank, of course. What else? Where are the others?"

"I do not understand."

Hemphill sighed. "All right. Where's this birth tank?"

The place looked like the storeroom of a biology lab, badly lighted, with equipment piled and crowded, laced with pipes and conduits. But perhaps no living technician had ever worked here.

"You were *born* here?" Hemphill demanded.

"Yes."

"He's crazy."

"No, wait." Maria's voice sank to an even lower whisper, as if she was frightened anew. She took the hand of the slack-faced man, and he bent his head to stare at their touching hands.

"Do you have a name?" she asked, as if of a lost child.

"I am Goodlife."

"I think it's hopeless," put in Hemphill.

The girl ignored him. "Goodlife? My name is Maria. And this is Hemphill."

No reaction.

"Who were your parents? Father? Mother?

"They were goodlife too. They helped the machine. There was a battle, and badlife killed them. But they had given cells of their bodies to the machine, and from them it made me. Now I am the only goodlife."

"Great God," whispered Hemphill.

Silent, awed attention seemed to move Goodlife when threats and pleas had not. His face moved in awkward grimaces; then he turned to stare into a corner. For almost the first time, he volunteered a communication: "I know they were like you. A man and a woman."

Hemphill wanted to sweep every cubic foot of the miles of mechanism with his hatred; he looked around.

"The damned things," he said, his voice cracking like the berserker's own. "What they've done to me. To you. To everyone."

Plans seemed to come when the strain of hating was greatest. He moved quickly to put a hand on Goodlife's shoulder. "Listen to me. Do you know what a radioactive isotope is?"

"Yes."

"There will be a place, somewhere, where the — the machine decides what it will do next — what strategy to follow. A place holding a block of some isotope with a long half-life. Probably near the center of the machine. Do you know of such a place?"

"Yes, I know where the strategic housing is."

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"Strategic housing." Hope mounted to a strong new level. "Is there a way for us to reach it?"

"You are badlife!" He knocked Hemphill's hand away, awkwardly. "You want to damage the machine, and you have damaged me. You are to be destroyed."

Maria took over, trying to soothe. "Goodlife — we are not bad, this man and I. Those who built this machine are the badlife. Someone built it, you know, some living people built it, long ago. They were the real badlife."

"Badlife." He might be agreeing with Maria, or accusing her.

"Don't you want to live, Goodlife? Hemphill and I want to live. We want to help you, because you're alive, like us. Won't you help us now?"

Goodlife was silent for a few moments. Then he turned back to face them and said: "All life thinks it is, but it is not. There are only particles, energy and space, and the laws of the machines."

Maria kept at him. "Goodlife, listen to me. A wise man once said: 'I think, therefore I am.' "

"A wise man?" he questioned, in his cracking voice. Then he sat down on the deck, hugging his knees and rocking back and forth. He might be thinking.

Drawing Maria aside, Hemphill said: "You know, we have a faint hope now. There's plenty of air in here, there's water and food. There are warships following this thing, there must be. If we can find a way to disable it, we can wait and maybe be picked up in a month or two."

She watched him silently for a moment. "Hemphill — what have these machines done to you?"

"My wife — my children." He thought his voice sounded almost indifferent. "They were on Pascalo, three years ago; there was nothing left. This machine, or one like it."

She took his hand, as she had taken Goodlife's. They both looked down at the joined fingers, then raised their eyes, smiling briefly together at the similarity of action.

"Where's the bomb?" Hemphill thought aloud suddenly, spinning around.

It lay in a dim corner. He grabbed it up again, and strode over to where Goodlife sat and rocked.

"Well, are you with us? Us, or the ones who built the machine?"

Goodlife stood up, and looked closely at Hemphill. "They were inspired by the laws of physics, which controlled their brains, to build the machine. Now the machine has preserved them as images. It has preserved my father and mother, and it will preserve me."

"What images do you mean? Where are they?"

"The images in the theater."

The right course seemed to be to accustom him to co-operation, win his confidence, learn about him and the machine. Then, to the strategic housing.

"Will you guide us to the theater, Goodlife?"

It was by far the largest air-filled room they had yet found, with a hundred seats of a shape usable by Earthmen, though Hemphill

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guessed it had been built for someone else. The theater was elaborately furnished and well lighted. When the door closed behind them, the ranked images of intelligent creatures brightened into life upon the stage.

The stage became a window into a vast hall. One person stood forward at an imaged lectern; he was a slender, fine-boned being, topologically like a man except for the single eye that stretched across his face, with a bright bulging pupil that slid to and fro like mercury.

The speaker's voice was a high-pitched torrent of clicks and whines. Most of those in the ranks behind him wore a kind of uniform. When he paused, they whined in unison.

"What does he say?" Maria whispered.

Goodlife looked at her. "The machine has told me that it has lost the meaning of the sounds."

"Then may we see the images of your parents, Goodlife?"

Hemphill, watching the stage, started to object; but the girl was right. The sight of this fellow's parents might be more immediately helpful.

Goodlife found a control somewhere.

Hemphill was surprised momentarily that the parents appeared only in flat projected pictures. First the man was there, against a plain background, blue eyes and neat short beard, nodding his head with a pleasant expression on his face. He wore the lining coverall of a spacesuit.

Then the woman, holding some kind of cloth before her for covering, and looking straight into the camera. She had a broad face and red braided hair. There was hardly time to see anything more before the alien orator was back, whining faster than ever.

Hemphill turned to ask: "Is that all? All you know of your parents?"

"Yes. Now they are images, they no longer think they exist. The badlife killed them."

The creature in the projection was assuming, Maria thought, a more didactic tone. Three-dimensional charts of stars and planets appeared near him, one after another, and he gestured at them as he spoke. He had vast numbers of stars and planets on his charts to boast about; she could tell somehow that he was boasting.

Hemphill was moving toward the stage a step at a time, more and more absorbed. Maria did not like the way the light of the images reflected on his face.

Goodlife, too, watched the stage pageant which perhaps he had seen a thousand times before. Maria could not tell what thoughts might be behind his meaningless face which had never had another human face to imitate. On impulse she took his arm again.

"Goodlife, Hemphill and I are alive, like you. Will you help us now? Then we will always help you." She had a sudden mental picture of Goodlife rescued, taken to a planet, cowering among the staring badlife.

"Good. Bad." His hand reached to take hold of hers; he had removed his suit gauntlets. He swayed back

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and forth as if she attracted and repelled him at the same time. God, she wanted to scream and wail for him, to tear apart with her fingers the mindlessly proceeding metal that had made him what he was.

"We've got them!" It was Hemphill, coming back from the stage, where the recorded tirade went on unrelentingly. He was exultant. "Don't you see? He's showing what must be a complete catalogue, of every star and rock they own. It's a victory speech. But when we study those charts we can find them, we can track them down and *reach* them!"

"Hemphill." She wanted to calm him back to concentration on immediate problems. "How old are those — pictures, up there? What part of the galaxy do they show? Or were they even made in another galaxy? Will we ever be able to tell?"

Hemphill lost some enthusiasm. "Anyway, it's a chance to track them down; we've got to save this information." He pointed at Goodlife. "He's got to take me to what he calls the strategic housing; then we can sit and wait for the warships, or maybe get off this damned thing in a boat."

She stroked Goodlife's hand, soothing a baby. "Yes, but he's confused. How could he be anything else?"

"Of course." Hemphill paused to consider. "You can handle him much better than I."

She didn't answer.

Hemphill went on: "Now you're a woman, and he appears to be a physically healthy young male. Calm him down if you like, but somehow you've *got* to persuade him to help me. Everything depends on it." He had turned toward the stage again, unable to keep half his mind from the star charts. "Take him out somewhere, for a little walk and talk; don't get far away."

And what else was there to do? She led Goodlife from the theater while the dead man on the stage clicked and shouted, cataloguing his thousand suns.

IV

Too much had happened, was still happening, and all at once he could no longer stand to be near the badlife. Goodlife found himself pulling away from the female, running, flying down the passages, toward the place where he had fled when he was small and strange fears had come from nowhere. It was the room where the machine always saw and heard him, and was ready to talk to him.

He stood before the attention of the machine, in the chamber-that-has-shrunk. He thought of the place so, because he could remember it clearly as a larger room, where the scanners and speakers of the machine towered above his head. He knew the real change had been his own physical growth; still, this compartment was set apart in a special association with food and sleep and protective warmth.

"I have listened to the badlife, and shown them things," he said, fearing punishment.

"I know that, Goodlife, for I have

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watched. These things have become a part of my experiment."

What joyous relief! It said nothing of punishment, though it must know that the words of the badlife had shaken and confused him. He had even imagined himself showing the man Hemphill the strategic housing, and so putting an end to all punishment, for always.

"They wanted me — they wanted me to —"

"I have watched. I have listened. The man is tough and evil, powerfully motivated to fight against me. I must understand his kind, for they cause much damage. He must be tested to his limits, to destruction. He thinks himself free inside me, and so he will not think as a prisoner. This is important."

Goodlife pulled off his irritating suit; the machine would not let the badlife in here. He sank down to the floor and wrapped his arms around the base of a scanner-speaker console. Once long ago the machine had given him a thing that was soft and warm when he held it... he closed his eyes.

"What are my orders?" he asked, sleepily. Here in this chamber all was steady and comforting, as always.

"First, do not tell the badlife of these orders. Then, do what the man Hemphill tells you to do. No harm will come to me."

"He has a bomb."

"I watched his approach, and I disabled his bomb, even before he entered to attack me. His pistol can do me no serious harm. Do you think one badlife can conquer me?"

"No. Smiling, reassured, he curled into a more comfortable position. "Tell me about my parents." He had heard the story a thousand times, but it was always good.

"Your parents were good, they gave themselves to me. Then, during a great battle, the badlife killed them. The badlife hated them, as they hate you. When they say they like you, they lie, with the evil untruth of all badlife.

"But your parents had each given me a part of their bodies, and from them I made you. Your parents were destroyed completely by the badlife, or I would have saved even their non-functioning bodies for you to see. That would have been good."

"Yes."

"The two badlives have searched for you; now they are resting. Sleep, Goodlife."

He slept.

Awakening, he remembered a dream in which two people had beckoned him to join them on the stage of the theater. He knew they were his mother and father, though they looked like the two badlife. The dream faded before his waking mind could grasp it firmly.

He ate and drank, while the machine talked to him.

"If the man Hemphill wants to be guided to the strategic housing, take him there. I will capture him there, and let him escape later to try again. When finally he can be provoked to fight no more, I will destroy him. But I mean to preserve the life of the female; you and she will produce more goodlife for me."

"Yes!" It was immediately clear

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what a good thing that would be. They would give parts of their bodies to the machine, so new goodlife bodies could be built, cell by cell. And the man Hemphill, who punished and damaged with his fast-swinging arm, would be utterly destroyed.

When he rejoined the badlife, the man Hemphill barked questions and threatened punishment until Goodlife was confused and a little frightened. But Goodlife agreed to help, and was careful to reveal nothing of what the machine planned. Maria was more pleasant than every. He touched her whenever he could.

Hemphill demanded to be taken to the strategic housing. Goodlife agreed at once; he had been there many times. There was a high-speed elevator that made the fifty-mile journey easy.

Hemphill paused, before saying: "You're too damn willing, all of a sudden." Turning his face to Maria. "I don't trust him."

This badlife thought he was being false! Goodlife was angered; the machine never lied, and no properly obedient goodlife could lie.

Hemphill paced around, and finally demanded: "Is there any route that approaches this strategic housing in such a way that the machine cannot possibly watch us?"

Goodlife thought. "I believe there is one such way. We will have to carry extra tanks of air, and travel many miles through vacuum." The machine had said to help Hemphill, and help he would. He hoped he could watch when the male badlife was finally destroyed.

There had been a battle, in some time that could hardly be related meaningfully to any Earthly calendar. The berserker had fought some terrible opponent, and had taken a terrible lance-thrust of a wound. A cavity two miles wide at the widest, and fifty miles deep, had been driven in by a sequence of shaped atomic charges, through level after level of machinery, deck after deck of armor, and had been stopped only by the last inner defenses of the buried unliving heart. The berserker had survived, and crushed its enemy, and soon afterward its repair machines had sealed over the outer opening of the wound, using extra thicknesses of armor. It had meant to gradually rebuild the whole destruction; but there was so much life in the galaxy, and so much of it was stubborn and clever. Somehow battle damage accumulated faster than it could be repaired. The great hole was used as a conveyor path, and never much worked on.

When Hemphill saw the blasted cavity — what little of it his tiny suit-lamp could show — he felt a shrinking fear that was greater than any in his memory. He stopped on the edge of the void, drifting there with his arm instinctively around Maria. She had put on a suit and accompanied him, without protest or eagerness, without being asked.

It had already been an hour's journey from the airlock, through weightless vacuum inside the great machine. Goodlife had led the way through section after section, with every show of cooperation. Hemphill had the pistol ready, and the

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bomb, and two hundred feet of cord tied around his left arm.

But when Hemphill recognized the once-molten edge of the berserker's great scar for what it was, his delicate new hope of survival left him. This, the damned thing had survived. This, perhaps, had hardly weakened it. Again, the bomb under his arm was only a pathetic toy.

Goodlife drifted up to them. Hemphill had already taught him to touch helmets for speech in vacuum.

"This great damage is the one path we can take to reach the strategic housing without passing scanners or service machines. I will teach you to ride the conveyor. It will carry us most of the way."

The conveyor was a thing of forcefields and great rushing containers, hundreds of yards out in the Great Damage and running lengthwise through it. When the conveyor's forcefields caught the people up, their weightlessness was more than ever like falling, with occasional vast shapes, corpuscles of the beserker's bloodstream, flickering past in the near darkness to show movement.

Hemphill flew beside Maria, holding her hand. Her face was hard to see inside the helmet, but she did not seem to be looking at him. There was no need.

This conveyor was another mad new world, a fairy tale of monsters and flying and falling. Hemphill fell past his great fear, into a calm determination.

I can do it, he thought. The thing is blind and helpless here. I will do it, and I will survive if I can.

Goodlife led them from the slowing conveyor, to drift into a chamber hollowed in the inner armor by the final explosion at the end of the ancient lance-thrust. The chamber was an empty sphere a hundred feet across, from which cracks radiated out into the solid armor. On the surface nearest the center of the berserker, one fissure was as wide as a door, where the last energy of the enemy's blow had driven ahead.

Goodlife touched helmets. "I have seen the other end of this crack, from inside, at the strategic housing. It is only a few yards from here."

Hemphill hesitated for only a moment, wondering whether to send Goodlife through the twisting passage first. But if this was some incredibly complex trap, the trigger of it might be anywhere.

He touched his helmet to Maria's. "Stay behind him. Follow him through, and keep an eye on him."

The fissure narrowed as Hemphill followed it, but at the end it was still wide enough for him to force himself through.

This was the inner temple, another great hollow sphere. In the center was a complexity the size of a small house, shock-mounted on a web of girders that ran in every direction. This could be nothing but the strategic housing. There was a glow from it like flickering moonlight; forcefield switches responding to the random atomic turmoil within, somehow choosing what human shipping lane or colony would be next attacked, and how.

Hemphill felt a pressure rising in his mind and soul, toward a climax

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of triumphal hate. He drifted forward, cradling his bomb tenderly, starting to unwind the cord wrapped around his arm. He tied the free end delicately to the plunger of the bomb, as he approached the central complex.

I mean to live, he thought, to watch the damned thing die. I will tape the bomb against the central block, that so-innocent looking slab in there, and I will brace myself around two hundred feet of these heavy metal corners, and pull.

Goodlife stood braced in the perfect place from which to watch the heart of the machine, watching the man Hemphill string his cord. Goodlife felt a certain satisfaction that his prediction had been right, and that the strategic housing was approachable by this one narrow path of the great damage. They would not have to go back that way. When the badlife had been captured, all of them could ride up in the air-filled elevator Goodlife used when he came here for maintenance practice.

Hemphill had finished stringing his cord. Now he waved his arm at Goodlife and Maria, who clung to the same girder, watching. Now Hemphill pulled on the cord. Of course, nothing happened. The machine had said the bomb was disabled, and the machine would make very certain in such a matter.

Maria pushed away from beside Goodlife, and drifted in toward Hemphill.

Hemphill tugged again and again on his cord. Goodlife sighed impatiently, and moved. There was a great cold in the girders here; he could begin to feel it now through the fingers and toes of his suit.

At last, when Hemphill started back to see what was wrong with his device, the service machines came from where they had been hiding, to seize him. He tried to draw his pistol, but their grippers moved far too quickly.

It was hardly a struggle that Goodlife saw, but he watched with interest. Hemphill's figure had gone rigid in the suit, obviously straining every muscle to the limit. Why should the badlife try to struggle against steel and atomic power? The machines bore the man effortlessly away, toward the elevator shaft. Goodlife felt an uneasiness.

Maria was drifting, her face turned back toward Goodlife. He wanted to go to her and touch her again, but suddenly he was a little afraid, as before when he had run from her. One of the service machines came back from the elevator to grip her and carry her away. She kept her face turned toward Goodlife. He turned away from her, a feeling like punishment in the core of his being.

In the great cold silence, the flickering light from the strategic housing bathed everything. In the center, a chaotic block of atoms. Elsewhere, engines, relays, sensing cells. Where was it, really, the great machine that spoke to him? Everywhere, and nowhere. Would these new feelings, brought by the badlife, ever leave him? He tried to understand himself, and could not begin.

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Light flickered on a round shape among the girders and a few yards away, a shape that offended Goodlife's sense of the proper and necessary in machinery, Looking closer, he saw that it was a space helmet.

The motionless figure was wedged only lightly in an angle between frigid beams, but there was no force in here to move it.

He could hear the suit creak, stiff with great cold, when he grabbed it and turned it. Unseeing blue eyes looked out at Goodlife through the faceplate. The man's face wore a neat short beard.

"Ahhh, yes," sighed Goodlife inside his own helmet. A thousand times he had seen this face.

His father had been carrying something, heavy, strapped carefully to his ancient suit. His father had carried it this far, until the old suit had wheezed and failed.

His father, too, had followed the logical narrow path of the great damage, to reach the strategic housing without being seen. His father had choked and died and frozen here, carrying toward strategic housing what could only be a bomb.

Goodlife heard his own voice keening, without words, and he could not see plainly for the tears floating in his helmet. His fingers felt numbed with cold as he unstrapped the bomb and lifted it from his father . . .

V

Hemphill was too exhausted to do more than gasp as the service machine carried him out of the elevator and along the air-filled corridor toward the prison room. When the machine went dead and dropped him, he had to lie still for long seconds before he could attack it again. It had hidden his pistol somewhere, so he began to beat on the robot-like thing with his armored fists, while it stood unresisting. Soon it toppled over. Hemphill sat on it and beat it some more, sobbing.

It was nearly a minute later when the tremor of the explosion, racing from the compounded chaos of the berserker's torn-out heart, racing through metal beams and decks, reached the corridor, where it was far too faint for anyone to feel.

Maria, completely weary, sat where her metal captor had dropped her, watching Hemphill, pitying him and loving him.

He stopped his pointless pounding of the machine under him, and said hoarsely: "It's a trick, another damned trick."

The tremor had been too faint for anyone to feel, here, but Maria shook her head. "No, I don't think so." She saw that power still seemed to be on the elevator, and she watched the door of it.

Hemphill went away to search among the now-purposeless machines for weapons and food. He came back, raging again. What was probably an automatic destructor charge had wrecked the theater and the starcharts. They might as well get away in the boat.

She ignored him, still watching an elevator door which never opened. Soon she began quietly to cry.

END

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SCIENCE and SCIENCE FICTION: WHO BORROWS WHAT?

BY MICHAEL GIRSDANSKY

Every science-fiction writer is asked: "Where do you get your ideas?" Maybe we should ask scientists the same question!

It is a truism (but true for all that) that science fiction has borrowed many an idea from science. The obsessive fascination of certain writers and editors with ESP has taken its most immediate cue from the work of Dr. Rhine, and has given rise to a new sub-field of S-F: P-F, or Psience-Fiction. A slightly earlier cycle of anthropologically oriented stories (the genre is still with us) owes much of the skillful popularizations of Benedict (*Patterns of Culture*), Mead (*Coming of Age in Samoa*) & Co. And of course Newton's *action-reaction* gave us the grand-daddy of all S-F contrivances: the rocket.

That this trend is nothing new can be seen in the Pellucidar series of Burroughs. The notion of a hollow (and populated) earth—a geophysical impossibility, by the way—echoes the speculative "science" of Symmes, at least faintly acceptable in the first half of the 19th Century. Something vaguely reminiscent of this truly *pseudo*-scientific cosmology seems to have been percolating through Poe's head when he began,

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but never finished, his *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym.* And Poe's self-styled heir, Lovecraft, picked the ball up from there and went running mad and mephitic down into caves, pyramids and any other half-plausible womb-with-a-view toward Nyarlathotep, the idiot-god gibbering away at the heart of creation.

Even two and a half millenia ago, Plato concocted his illustrative myth of Atlantis in the *Timeus* and *Critias* from commonly accepted rumor or bases of fact. The flooding of the Greek island Atlante as reported by Thucydides seems, for example, to be responsible for the name of the supposed vanished continent.

But it's a poor ray-gun that won't fire both ways. If we take "science" in an extended sense — as avowedly serious inquiry into matters of fact — then science owes a good debt to science fiction as well as vice versa.

Plato's Atlantis is again a case in point. The vanishing of the Phoenician-Spanish city Tartessos, mariners' tales of reef and shallow in the Western Ocean, the still-extant doctrines of a dead-and-gone Golden Age — and these and other facts, half-facts or accepted beliefs — all doubtless went to provide the inspiration for Plato's story.

But the story, based on fact, turned into "fact." Once set down in Dialogue, the myth provoked speculation; and, Greek philosophizing having the reputation it did in the Middle Ages, speculation had a sad tendency to turn into certitude. By Jove, there *must* have been a mighty culture wiped out by natural catastrophe! And away we go for another half-millenium or so.

The first recognizable example of S-F borrowing from S(cience) can probably be found in the latter half of the 19th Century, a time highly propitious for what has been called psychoceramics, or crackpottery. A time when you could not toss a stone into the canebrake without raising a full flight of "animal magnetists," "etheric fluidists," Gobineau racists and table-rappers, all booming like bitterns as they flocked toward the lecture-hall, the ready buck and involvement in messy variants of transcendentalism. What an amazing longevity—!

Madame Blavatsky and Ignatius Donnelly might turn the myth of Atlantis to profitable and/or doctrinaire ends, but a respectible amount of interest was still generatable among those who simply wished to pierce to the heart of Truth. And the idea of "vanished Atlantis" is still with us, at least fragmentarily, and not just among the more certifiable. In 1961, a German seafaring expedition set sail to explore a possible site for Atlantis, though this time in the North Sea and not beyond the Pillars of Hercules. And there *has* been some progress. Even since Mme. Blavatsky. There was a gratifying absence of comment on "adepts," "secrets of the ancients," antigravity, and that mysterious, theophistical *vril* radiation which so far has escaped detection anywhere along the electromagnetic spectrum.

But if our German companions in the search after Truth ever made it from dockside, their findings must

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have been so dully prosaic (for which, read "negative") that wire-service stringers never bothered to send the bitter (or briney) truth back to the States.

In spite of what may often strike us as laughable shennanigans, leave us not be too snide nor superior. Progress is made by a particular kind of foolishness — which always implies a fool, let us remember. The Russians call the man touched by that kind of foolishness a "yurodivy," and by that they do no mean a simple nitwit. It takes a certain, very definite, kind of innocence to view Nature with a virgin eye, to start looking with a minimum of preconception. If to ask the right question is to have half the answer, then humility is in order. Crookes or Conan Doyle are not to be laughed at because they investigated Spiritualism. The only valid complaint (if there is a complaint which is valid) is that they did not investigate it thoroughly enough, forearmed with specialized knowledge of sleight-of-hand.

But what of the modern day, now that we are all so wise, perceptive and intelligent that we can never, be taken in? Even now, are there still instances of fiction giving something to Science?

It is hard to *prove* that a given line of investigation in modern science is the god-child of S-F. It would take a very hardy scientist indeed to admit, publicly or in print, that "Well, I was reading this thing by Wells (or Stapledon or Heinlein or Heinlein or Kornbluth — fill in any name you want to), and suddenly I thought that maybe . . ." Still less are we going to expect a Nobel Prize winner to 'fess up and admit that he was reading the *Thud and Blunder Stories* of September 1940 when the inspiration for the new antibiotic, trinitrofolderol, came into his mind.

But it is just as hard to escape the feeling that certain lines of research have been at least encouraged, if not positively inspired, by S-F.

The idea of the generation-ship, for instance. That interstellar (as distinct from interplanetary) travel might hinge on an immense craft, self-sufficient and environmentally stable like some huge balanced aquarium was suggested by Olaf Stapeldon (in *Starmaker*) and Robert Heinlein (in *Universe*) at a time when flight even to the moon was dreamed of by only a few dedicated fanatics playing with tiny rockets in their backyards — and some now-American citizens then financed by the *dritte Reich*. Nowadays, the concept of interplanetary flight — and even interstellar, hintingly, tangentially half-asymptotically—is respectable in academe. Hell! it's even reached the newspapers.

Katherine MacLean (*Incommunicado*) and Heinlein again (*Gulf*) both took up the notion of "efficiency" in language. MacLean's approach was by way of Communications Theory with the attendant idea of an entropy-free means of speech. Heinlein was more specific, postulating a language in which the hundreds of individual "sounds" (allophones) of which the human vocal apparatus is capable were used as

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distinct words. (The quite fantastic degree of muscular control and ear-discrimination needed in the transmission and reception of such a tongue were accounted for by Heinlein's positing an emergent race of superman. But try to imagine a telephone conversation in a tongue where minuscule slips-of-the-tongue might make the difference between "aardvark" and "mining-engineer"!)

But Heinlein went beyond the invention of a non-redundant language. He also included the logicality of a Russell or a Carnap. The tongue was one in which paradoxes could not be stated — they simply did not "translate."

And both MacLean and Heinlein were bringing up these points nearly a decade before LOGAN (LOGical LANguage) turned up in the June '61 issue of *Scientific American*, and other (apparently quite serious) proposals were made for some universal language, usually of some quasi-mathematical nature, to be used in communicating with extra-terrestrials.

Which logically brings us to Project Ozma.

If nothing else, the *name* of P.O. shows a debt of science to science-fiction, or to science-fantasy if you wish to be puristic. Frank L. Baum's *Oz* books used many themes since recurrant in S-F of later days: Tin Woodman (universal prothesis), Scarecrow (Golem-Frankenstein), even — stretching a point — Cowardly Lion (intelligent animal a la Eric Frank Russell's *The Undecided* or Wells *Island of Dr. Moreau*). Granted there are undisguised elements of the fantastickal in Ozland, but let us recollect that distinctions of genre were not sharply drawn at the turn of the century. H.G. Wells was thought (and thought himself) a "mainstream" author long *post facto*.

And nomenclature aside, Project Ozma is still something the science-fictioneer's own. Old fashionedly so, but still part of S-F. Remember those days? The ones before they invented "jump-space," "cee-plus fields," "hyperdrives"? The days when they really *did* honor Science-and-Einstein and the near certainty that nothing can travel faster than light. Cold-sleep ("suspended animation") or the generation-ship might be used. Even so, there were many who settled for the "science" in "science fiction." No trans-light speeds for them. Stapledon birthed the interplanetary culture of *Starmaker*, relying on (1) century-long travel at sub-light speeds — though often this was not a case of generation-ships, since he often assumed vast longevity, and (2) non-face-to-face contact.

True, Stapledon's communication-by-proxy was often of the telepathic (not ham-set) variety. But he was never very specific as to just how long it took thought waves to travel light-years.

A classic example of Project Ozma-ish borrowing (and yet of S-F conservatism) Cleve Cartmill's *Pest*. Here, the interspecies dialogue is between Earth and Venus! Earth is confronted with a plague of insects, and radio communication has been set up with our sunward sister. Venus, too, it seems is trouble with a pest destroying its food crops. The two

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planets begin to exchange helpful hints when interplanetary television is set up (the story written in the late 30's.) You guessed it. The ruling race on Venus is insectoidal — *their* pest a batch of tiny and unintelligent primates. The problem: where lies the loyalty of the two intelligent races — to fellow-intelligence or ancestral, phylogenetic kinship? Project Ozma may never have been infected with S-F influence. But . . .

The whole notion of communication with The Alien is not necessarily interstellar (or interplanetary) in nature. S-F had the idea some time ago, and Science seems to be catching up. Dr. John R. Lilly, author of *Man and Dolphin,* may never have been an *aficionado,* but we can have our suspicions. In Chapter 12 of the book ("implications") the S-F-knowledgeable reader must have the feeling of *deja vu* — I have been here before . . . Most obviously comes to mind Clifford Simak's *City* series, with the intelligent, bright, but *other* ways of seeing the things. (Can those familiar with the sequence ever forget Nathaniel, the perceptive and companionable and *different* scottie?)

Even closer to Lilly's hints as Sirius, the protagonist of Stapledon's short novel of the same name. A collie with a human I.Q., Sirius is truly a guess-in-advance. This may be closer to what Mankind will meet, either in our oceans or past earth's envelope of air, than all the bright boys at RAND can niggle at.

For Sirius is no idiot jester, no moronic analog to mankind. He is honestly someone "separate but equal." He catches, for example, the *scent* of God. A dog, with a dog's typically keen smell and poor sight, there is no beatific vision for him. He writes, dictates rather (for he has no hands, after all), two books on the sociology of the urban dog: *The Lamppost* and *Beyond the Lamppost.*

C.S. Lewis, too, perhaps gave Dr. Lilly a hint of what the risks of companionship may be with The Other Equal. In the *Postscript* to Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet* the author is at considerable pains to explain just why it is that the Martians do not have our human feeling about pets.

Lewis has three radically different and intelligent species on Perelandra (Mars). Each is remote in structure and in quality of mind from the other two, yet all are rational (*hnau,* in the interspecies language of Mars). There is stereoscopic vision of the spirit. Self-awareness does not peer out at the universe with a single pair of eyes. The quality of *hnaudom* is not limited to one set of fixed equipment. There is a diversity of creatures, and Intelligence is neither alone nor lonely.

Perhaps Stapledon, Simak, Lewis, never *were* read by Dr. Lilly. Coincidence again? It is a bit of a whale to swallow, considering science fiction's constantly reiterated theme of confrontation between Man and Alien.

One rather specialized discipline does admittedly owe a debt to S-F: Industrial Design. M.I.T. was famous for some years because of its

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Arcturans. These citizens of another solar system — tripedal, vaguely birdlike, oviparous and with incredibly slow reflexes — were defined for M.I.T.-ans as a potentially valuable export market. The problem: design stuff for them that they could buy; anything from automobiles to egg-brooders to heavy machiner. Just *try* designing a self-propelled vehicle capable of high speeds, yet suitable for a driver with a 10-second reaction-time! The Arcturians were both brain-twister and intellectual stimulus; traits making them valuable in teaching.. (Incidentally, the students taking the course were presented with a complete work-up of solar system, planet, flora-and-fauna, and Arcturian sociology which would do credit the a Hal Clement appendix to one of his problem-novels, e.g., *Mission of Gravity*. In fact, the M.I.T. resumes are infinitely more thorough.)

And then of course there is a good deal of "debatable territory"; instances in which we cannot tell for sure if the science or the science fiction came first. And there are instances where the discipline may not be precisely "science."

It really becomes difficult to establish priority when one man combines the functions of both scientist writing science fiction and S-F author. Though many do so in areas outside their specialties.

Isaac Asimov, for example, is best known for his Foundation series and the Three Laws of Robotics stories. But the former have as their subject-matter sociometrics and history; the later, cybernetics and interpersonal psychotherapy for precision-manufacture psychoneurotics. Neither set of disciplines (even psychiatry in the ferric state) can be comprised under biochemistry — the subject which is Asimov's academic speciality, the subject which he taught at Boston, the subject on which he co-authored a non-fiction text, and the one for which his popularizations have been most impressive (*Wellsprings of Life, The Living River*, etc.).

Edward E. ("Doc") Smith also holds a Ph. D. — but in organic chemistry, not in death-rays-at-short-notice, applied planet-busting nor nor non-einsteinian-space-drives-at-home-for-fun-and-profit, the main themes of "Doc's" S-F yarns. Fictionally, The Smithy has been devoted to the forging of bigger and better intergalactic combat and supermen to match. So far as is known, "Doc" has yet to do novel, novella, or even short story concerning the influence of breakfast-food on The World of the Future. And yet in fact it is just the snaps, pops, crackles, et cetera which are his professional life — technical and administrative positions connected with production of grain-food products.

Raymond F. Jones, too, received his primal breaking-in as a radio engineer, subsequently spending some years as a weatherman for the government. Yet the crucial problem at the heart of many (if not most) of his stories is neither how to design a better single sideband rig, nor how to tell when you need an umbrella on a treacherously sunny day. The oft-repeated message to his tales would seem to be: put not your faith in

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the union- and government-officials of this "or any other" world; they are almost certain to be corrupt, venal, stupid, or any conceivable permutation of the three.

But there are hazier instances. What do we make of the S-F writers who *do* write of matters involved with their disciplines?

Fred Hoyle, for example, is one of the originators of the continuous-creation hypothesis. He did not have to pick up the notion from test, popularization, or the latest issue of *Scientific American*. He vas dere, Sharely. The theory that the totality of the universe — not simply the existence of any particular system or even galaxy — is eternal has been used (usually at the fringes of the plot) by Hoyle in more than one of his S-F works. But who can be a mind-reader? Did the idea pop up *ex machina* from Hoyle's brains in the process of drafting a work of fiction? Doubtful at best, since Hoyle, Bondi and the rest were working at their cosmology sometime before Hoyle used it for fictional purposes.

But who can tell for sure? Every author has works locked in a metaphorical trunk in an imaginary attic. It may well be that Hoyle did start with some some of gernsbackian inspiration during adolescence or even (for he is English) during tykehood.

For that matter, just how do we separate the *S-F* from the *S* with such a basic author as Stapledon? In spite of Wellsian and Vernalist protestations, S. has far more relevance to the current scene. Instructor in both physiology and philosophy, Stapledon blended insights from his teaching with his particular statements in fiction. One often gets the feeling that the knowledge that such a genre as S-F *existed* gave Stapledon the freedom he needed for philosophical speculation. In this sense, the debt may run from philosophy to S-F. But it would take a bold guesser to be absolutely certain of the direction in which inspiration ran. Peter and Paul may both have been robbed, to pay each other.

It would be hard to conceive much of modern S-F without the brilliant imaginativeness of Stapledon, and just as hard to believe that much of his originality did not spring from a scientific and philosophic intelligence which had earlier been quickened by "the intelligent heart."

In many a case it may be impossible to tell. On many another, it may be simple—the debt to science-fiction obvious. Whatever the particular instance, it would take a marvelous arrogance to dispute the debt owed to a field of fiction not even given fair notice in the book-reviews. Verne and Wells are "classics," read and noticed. But there is a good deal more, as all but the rankest outsiders — are there still any such? — know.

Prodding and hinting, S-F has helped to make our world of today what it is (perhaps the world of tomorrow, too).

But whether that is something of which S-F should be proud is another matter entirely. END

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FAR AVANAL

BY J. T. McINTOSH

ILLUSTRATED BY NODEL

The far stars were desperate for men. They promised a rich, rewarding life —but would they keep their promise?

I

The yellow suit, yes, but which necktie?

Oliver had less than two hours to dress, including his bath, and he didn't possess a robovalet. That was ironic. In business hours his time as a robotics engineer, 1st class, was far too valuable for him even to cast a passing glance at any mechanism as elementary as that of a robovalet. Yet he had to waste hours of his leisure time because a robovalet was out of his financial reach. There was nothing very unusual about it—workers in a mint were no doubt short of cash quite as often as anyone else. Still, it was ironic.

His pale blue shirt was just right, but the necktie? His only dark blue tie unfortunately had a red stripe which spoiled the whole effect. And the last time he had worn his yellow tie Angela had said crossly: "Heavens, is that the only tie you've got?" Play safe with a gray tie? Or be daring and wear a red tie?

He had to look his best because Angela was always immaculate al-

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though, being a girl and a pretty girl at that, she didn't really have to be. Why not? According to the latest population figures for the area there were 73,000,000 single men in the 17-25 bracket, and 24,000,000 single girls. Q.E.D.

Settling for the blue tie with the red stripe at last, he put the finishing touches to his toilette and glanced at his watch. Just time, if he got a hoverplane right away. Angela became sulky if he was late and pointed out several times during the evening that if he couldn't be on time she could get plenty of steadies who could.

He was lucky. Outside his apartment he did get a hoverplane right away. The driver looked surprised when Oliver gave the address. It was twenty-three miles away, which was a long way to go for a date, even in these times.

The hoverplane hopped to the nearest unsurfaced track and built up speed along it. The glowing ads leaped at Oliver out of the darkness: *Vitana Shirts for Men . . . A farm for YOU in Mersam. . .Smoke Virginia X — the girls love it . . .* $50,000 *a year for YOU on Vega IV . . .*

Oliver closed his eyes. The driver was lucky. Safety regulations demanded that the glass in his cabin be polarized so that he wasn't distracted by the ads.

A farm for YOU in Mersam . . . They can keep it, Oliver thought derisively. In the first place, who wanted a farm? In the second place, Mersam was fifty-five light-years away, which meant, say, 30 years in space to get there, which meant roughly ten years off your life. $50,000 *a year for YOU on Vega IV . . .* That wasn't such a good offer, because Vega wasn't so far away — around 65 years spacebound and less than five off your life. All the same, they could keep that too.

He opened his eyes as the car left the hoverplane track. A last ad seared his brain: *For marriage insurance, consult Safesure.*

That was a laugh. Once it had been girls who had brought breach of promise cases. Now the men took out insurance that their marriage which had been arranged would eventually take place — and the premiums were staggering.

Oliver paid off the driver at the end of Angela's street. Obviously he was calling on a girl, and some cabdrivers were known to run a small racket in addresses. They sold the addresses with no guarantee except that a girl who had dates lived there. Addresses with any kind of guarantee came much higher.

Having five minutes in hand after all, Oliver strolled slowly along the sidewalk. It was a shabby street. Angela's father didn't make much money (her mother had run off with someone who did). You couldn't exactly blame Angela, Oliver thought, for trying to do the best she could for herself. Well, she wouldn't do too badly with him. At 23 he wasn't exactly rich — not making quite twice as much as her old man, say — but at 33 he'd be very comfortable and by the time he was 43 he'd be well up in the robotics industry. There was scarcely anything safer.

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He was still a couple of minutes early when he reached the house, but he rang anyway.

Within ten seconds Angela herself opened the door. "Hi, Oliver," she said guardedly. Only two words, but he sensed something was wrong. Had he forgotten something? Should he have brought flowers, although she had told him not to?

"You might as well come in," she said, as if there had been some doubt in her mind.

He didn't try to kiss her in the hall, knowing there would be no kissing until patient investigation on his part had established what was wrong — probably, he decided, his conscience clear, nothing to do with him at all.

Anyway, it was Angela who took the initiative. She faced him squarely and said: "I'm sorry, Oliver. I've got somebody with me. I want you to meet him."

"Oh," he said in a flat voice. "Like that, is it?"

In a world in which women held all the aces, and most of the other high cards as well, partings were becoming more and more as women liked them — sad. sweet, sentimental. This sort of scene was already fashionable — the girl, the old love, the new love, the two men expected to shake hands and say the appropriate things gruffly: "I hope you make her happy, you lucky guy." "Tough luck, fellah. This time I got the breaks. Better luck next time."

Oliver wasn't in a mood to be sad, sweet and sentimental, and he had no intention of saying the expected things to some guy he didn't know but whose guts he hated. He took a couple of seconds to face the fact that he had lost Angela, that she wouldn't let things go this far unless she was really sure — and unless the unknown victor was better looking and had far more money than Oliver had.

Then without warning he smacked Angela hard on the cheek. "You've needed that for a long time," he said. "I only wish I'd done it six months and five thousand dollars ago."

Leaving her open-mouthed, he spun on his heel and barged out.

He walked through the night boiling with impotent rage. Well, what could you do? A man needed a girl. With three men to every available girl your chances obviously weren't good, but only the most timid pessimists withdrew from the contest without a fight and contended themselves with the usual commercial substitutes for love. You wanted a girl, you tried for a girl. So that wasn't the real trouble.

The real trouble was that drawing a prize didn't mean you could keep it. The girls could do what they liked, and they knew it. They could insist on absolute faithfulness to them without guaranteeing faithfulness in return. Right up to the wedding day most girls considered themselves free to accept any intriguing outside date. And even beyond it — well, divorce was so easy that a man often knew nothing about it until he received a final decree.

To be fair, some women were as loyal and faithful as women had ever

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been. But where was a man to find such a paragon? The chances against finding a girl like that weren't three to one but more like twenty to one. And when you did find her, naturally she was being loyal and faithful to somebody else.

Oliver found himself before the flaming lights of a House of Pleasure. He looked at it for a moment, frowning, and then walked on.

In most Houses of Pleasure the pleasure was spread pretty thin. There was a floor show, of course; you can look, but don't touch. After-the-show arrangements were out of the question because the dancers usually played at least three clubs in one night. There were house girls, true. But these "girls" were usually over forty and ugly as sin. Young and beautiful courtesans were strictly for millionaires.

No, you couldn't exactly blame Angela and the others of her ilk, he thought, blaming her. Since she was thirteen she had known she'd have a life of luxury if she played her cards right. She'd be a fool to settle for less — to settle for a 23-year-old robotics engineer who would never make as much as a dancer or a successful courtesan.

He had accepted the break without shock, because he had known all along it had to come.

Finished with women for ever, he went home.

II

Oliver let the door of the Robotics, Inc, workshop swing shut behind him, turned left and walked fifty yards, and entered the cafeteria where he usually lunched.

"This way, Mr. Carne," said a quiet voice.

Oliver turned and saw a well-dressed man of forty-five whose face was vaguely familiar. He followed him because he probably ought to know the man. Perhaps he was an important customer Oliver had once met, or one of the Robotics managers.

Oliver paused, however, when he found that the stranger was leading him to the expensive restaurant upstairs.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm afraid I don't remember your name."

"No, why should you? Tom Goldstone. Call me Tom."

The name struck no chord. Oliver stayed where he was.

"It would be a great pleasure to buy you lunch, Oliver," said Goldstone.

"Why. Are you selling something?"

"No, as a matter of fact I want to give you something."

Satisfied that Goldstone was neither a customer nor a manager, Oliver turned away. "No, thanks," he said.

Goldstone took his arm gently but firmly. "You can always say no afterwards if you wish," he said. "No need to say it before you have any idea what it is that you're turning down."

Oliver went with him reluctantly. He had a sensitive streak, and he hated awkward situations . . . like being expected to say polite things to the man who had taken Angela away

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from him, or having to walk out on a man who bought him an expensive lunch. And he would almost certainly have to walk out on Goldstone, for Oliver rarely allowed himself to be pushed into anything. If he decided to buy a twenty-five-volume encyclopedia, he'd write to the publishers and order it. He would not be bulldozed into buying it after a session with the most persuasive salesman.

Oliver often had trouble with salesmen because his mild manner gave them the impression that their pitch was getting across, that a sale was in the bag. But he was quite as capable of saying no in the end as in the beginning. He therefore preferred never to let salesmen start their pitch.

Goldstone confined himself to small talk while they ate. It was only when they sat back and lit cigars that he approached his purpose.

"You've been wondering where you saw me before. It was at the Avanal Immigration office last year, when you called for information."

"Oh, yes," Oliver said, remembering.

"You can't say we've chased you up, Oliver. That was exactly a year ago, and I've left it until now before asking if you're still thinking of going to Avanal."

"Well, I never was, exactly."

"But you were interested."

"Some of the colonies make fantastic offers to get people out there. Like everybody else. I wondered what the catch was."

"And did you find out?"

"According to you, there's no catch. But . . . no offense, Mr. Goldstone —"

"Tom."

"Okay, Tom. Well, you're an immigration agent for Avanal, which is Pollux II, which is thirty light-years away. You were born on Avanal around . . . 115 years ago?"

Goldstone nodded approvingly. "Exactly right, Oliver. Exactly 115 years ago. When I was thirty-five I came to Earth. That took seventy-five years, during which I aged about five years. I've been here five years since then. So?"

"So the Avanal you know is the Avanal of eighty years ago. And the colonists you send out are going to reach the Avanal of seventy-five years from now. That makes a slight difference of 55 years. There's a lot of changes in Earth in 55 years — and far more in a new, growing world like Avanal."

Once more Goldstone nodded approvingly. "One of the reasons why we want you, Oliver, is because you're shrewd enough to work things out exactly as you've done. What you say is perfectly true. But there are other factors. For example, there's radio communication, which takes only a little over thirty years. So I know some of what was going on there thirty years ago, and I can send short messages which will be received in thirty years. That makes a certain difference."

Oliver nodded politely, though the difference didn't seem highly significant to him.

"A lot of young men think of emigrating," Goldstone said reflective-

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ly. "They always did and they always will, so long as there's any place to emigrate to. Of those who think about it, probably less than twenty per cent ever do. And I'm only concerned with those who want to go to Avanal."

"Then," said Oliver firmly, "you're not concerned with me."

Goldstone smiled. "You can let me put the position to you, anyway. Some colonies want anybody who will go. Most colonies want women."

"Ay, there's the rub," said Oliver dryly.

"Avanal doesn't," said Goldstone significantly. "Think about that."

"If you could promise a woman for every man, you'd get a million volunteers a day. But you can't. I looked into that too."

"Can I tell you something in confidence, Oliver? Something you'll keep to yourself even if you don't go to Avanal?"

"Sure, if you want to."

"By the time you reach Avanal—if you go — there'll be a woman for every man."

Oliver couldn't help looking skeptical. "That's the truth — and you want to keep it secret? I'm not calling you a liar, Mr. Go — Tom, but if that's true, why don't you shout it from the housetops?"

"Because," said Goldstone carefully, "we don't want any more colonists — unless they're experts. We want you, Oliver. You're a robotics expert."

"I wouldn't be by the time I reached Avanal. I'd be seventy-five years out of date."

"Oliver, I'm disappointed in you. Haven't you realized that Avanal will always be seventy-five years behind Earth? Sure, by radio there's only a thirty-year lag. But we can't send complicated technical information by radio. It's too expensive and half of what is sent is lost anyway. Listen, suppose you do go to Avanal. You arrive in seventy-five years, apparent age twenty-eight. As an expert in the latest Terran developments in robotics, you're automatically a leading man in Avanal's industry. You may be seventy-five years behind Terran practice, but since it's always going to take seventy-five years to get information to Avanal, what difference is that going to make, Follow me,"

"Yes, I guess so."

Goldstone was beginning to make sense.

In time the colonies' research projects would be independent of the galaxy's leading treasure-house of technology, Earth. But that would take a lot of time. Far more than another seventy-five years.

"When did the last robotics engineer go out from Earth?" Oliver demanded shrewdly.

"Twenty years ago. That's the last time an engineer of equivalent qualifications to yours went. Of course, it'll be fifty-five years before he reaches Avanal, but as far as you're concerned he's got a twenty-year start. Or if you like to look at it another way, you've got twenty years' more knowledge than he has."

"Why such a gap?"

Goldstone spread his hands. "Oliver, robotics is important, but so

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are medicine, electronics, nuclear physics, chemistry, and five hundred other fields. Good men get on even on Earth. And we don't want duds. Of those who do go, the biggest and nearest and richest colonies get first pick —"

"Okay, I understand." Oliver paused for a moment, re-evaluating.

The big snag about emigrating was that you couldn't come back. You weren't going to give up ten years of living simply to go to Avanal and return to Earth 150 years later, even if Avanal's immigration authorities permitted this — which they did not. Individuals didn't have the kind of cash needed to transport themselves thirty light-years. Only governments could afford that. Neither Avanal nor any other colony was going to pay for a would-be colonist to travel out, take a quick look round, decide he didn't like the place and go home again.

And this fact — coupled with half a dozen others — led to a great deal of public suspicion about what the colonies offered. Nobody believed they told 100 per cent lies. But nobody believed, either, that their propaganda was 100 per cent true.

You probably did get a farm for free, simply for going to Mersam. But it was quite possible, for all anyone knew, that what actually happened was that you were given twenty-five acres of uncleared ground and told you could go ahead and build your house whenever you liked.

The time-lag insured that if the immigration promises of any colony were ever exposed, they'd be exposed about a century too late. So it would always be possible for Mersam, Avanal, Vega IV and the other settlements to shrug off all responsibility: "That was in the bad old days. Nothing like that ever happens now."

Oliver started. While he had been deep in thought, Goldstone had disappeared. As Oliver looked around, a waiter came over to him and handed him a note.

"Your friend paid the bill and left this for you," the waiter said.

The note read: "Think it over, Oliver. I'll buy you lunch again in a week's time. I expect by then you'll have some questions for me."

III

The blonde who lived upstairs smiled invitingly at Oliver.

He nearly tripped over his feet. She had never previously acknowledged his existence. Her name was Lorette Miller, and she was a lady of easy virtue but extreme expense.

Women weren't quite used to their position of power even yet, though they had held it for nearly a century. And, as ever, they didn't trust each other. They refused to organize. So instead of holding the male world to ransom as a body, they did the best they could for themselves as individuals.

It was no secret that the present situation was at least as bad psychologically for women as for men. They weren't really happy. Most of them refused to believe the obvious truth, that they were in such demand strictly because the supply was limited. They preferred to believe, in-

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dividually, that they were so attractive they could have been *female fatales* even in a world of sex parity.

Lorette was a girl who conceivably might have been, at that. Beauty was her business, and she worked long hours at it. Her professionalism left her little time for uninteresting, unimportant characters like Oliver.

When she smiled at him he knew that there was something in the wind. He instantly suspected Tom Goldstone, whom he was due to meet again the following day. Had Goldstone instituted measures to soften him up somehow? Why it should be in Goldstone's interests to have Lorette smile at Oliver wasn't at all clear, but Oliver could think of no other reason why she should.

He went up to his apartment . . . and five minutes later there was a tap on the door.

It was no surprise at all, now, to see Lorette in the doorway.

"Mr. Carne?" she said, smiling. "Look, I . . . well, to come straight to the point, my hair drier needs fixing and I wondered if you . . .?"

She let it hang.

"Sure," Oliver said. "Right away." She hadn't smiled at him just for this. As he followed her upstairs, reeling under the impact of the heady perfume she wore, he knew that this was nothing more than the handiest excuse. She had smiled at him on her way up, before she found that her hair drier needed fixing.

Her apartment was as expected—fabulous to the point of ludicrousness. "There it is," she said, pointing to the hair drier. "You know about things like that, don't you?"

"Sure," he said, seeing at a glance that what she had done was tug one of the terminals loose.

"You'll be able to fix it? I mean, if you're sure, I'll go right ahead and wash my hair now."

"Go ahead."

She closed the bedroom door behind her and a little later he heard the sound of running water from the bathroom beyond.

Although he had no tools with him, it didn't matter. All he needed was the blade of a penknife. He didn't finish tightening back the cover, leaving it so that he could be just finishing when she emerged. He had half a mind to finish the job and go, but curiosity got the better of him.

Oliver was fully aware that one of the reasons why he had lost Angela was his over-eagerness. Well, how could a guy help it? You couldn't airily wave a bus good-by, knowing another would be along in three minutes. You had to run for it, for there might never be another.

Of course Angela had despised him. He despised himself for letting himself be trampled upon.

If it were food, you wouldn't despise yourself for begging for it. You had to have food or you'd die. If it was necessary to beg you, you had to beg and you needn't lose any self respect.

But it was just possible to live entirely without women. Many men succeeded in doing so. You despised yourself for wasting so much time, money, energy and dignity chasing after something you didn't *have* to have.

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Lorette swirled back, her head turbanned. She wasn't overdoing the vamp act, probably not deeming it necessary. She was modestly wrapped in a long robe, and the neckline of a slip just showed above the top button.

"You managed?" she cooed.

"Sure."

For a moment she forgot the charm. "Can't you say anything but 'sure'?" she snapped.

"Sure," he said.

She laughed, turning on the charm again. She made no move to take the hair drier, test it or use it. Instead she sat on a high chair, letting Oliver look at her ankles.

"Maybe you could do something else for me," she said casually.

This was it. Evidently she considered it unnecessary to establish a patient foundation: getting him to her apartment and showing him her ankles ought to be enough.

"Yes?" Oliver said.

"Well, I've got myself in a spot of trouble. The other night somebody was killed in a street accident, and my car was damaged. There are charges . . ."

"You were driving the car?"

As he bluntly expressed the awkward factor in words, she evidently decided it was advisable to ensnare him a fraction more. She crossed her legs, letting the robe slip off her knees.

"Well, there wasn't a positive identification," she said. "I got away . . . Of course, it was my car, and they know a woman was driving it. But . . ."

"But you think you can get away with it if I swear you were with me."

"Yes, that's it," she said eagerly, pleased by his grasp of the situation. "I'm not suggesting you should do it for nothing, Mr. Carne — Oliver." She gave him an arch look.

"Were you drunk?"

She pouted. "I'm never drunk! I'd had a few highballs. The police say the car was reeking of bourbon, but that can't be true . . ."

"Because you were drinking gin?"

Things were not going quite as she had planned. She did the only thing she knew to redirect them. She leaned over to adjust her high-heeled slippers. Oliver stared, as intended, at her breasts, almost forgetting for the moment that she was trying to make him an accessory to homicide.

Homicide . . . A thought stirred in her mind.

"Who did you kill?" he demanded.

The phrasing shocked her. "I've been telling you —"

"I know what you've been telling me. Who did you kill?"

"It was an accident. I hadn't the slightest intention . . ." Her voice trailed away as even she, bird-witted as she was, realized that by insisting it was an accident and that she had no intention of killing the person concerned, she was giving exactly the opposite impression. "If you must now, it was Susie Donogue."

"It was, eh?" Oliver felt sick. He'd heard of Susie Donogue. She lived not far away and was in the same line of business as Lorette. She was a rival and it was not hard to believe that Lorette hated her. It was very hard to believe that Lorette was sorry she was dead.

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He might be wrong, of course. But he was pretty sure this was one of the nastier examples of the present distorted social pattern.

Lorette had a beautiful face, a sensational body, and an IQ which could crawl under a stone and never be noticed. Children and even adults had been spoiled at all periods in history, but never before with the mad thoroughness that was current today.

Society had taught Lorette that she was a truly wonderful being, worthy of all that was best in life. To get everything she wanted, no patience, no training, no hardship and no self-sacrifice were necessary. She could go through male friends like stockings, wearing them once and then throwing them away, knowing the supply was inexhaustible.

The one tiny fly in her ointment, apparently, had been Susie Donogue. So she got rid of Susie Donogue. Why not? It was inconceivable that in any particular the world should not be prepared to let Lorette do exactly as she liked . . .

And she had picked Oliver to help her get away with murder.

Oliver suddenly saw red. "You loathsome bitch," he said distinctly. For the second time in a week, the second time in his life, he hit a woman. He hit Lorette on the face, in the soft parts of her body. As her mouth went slack he mashed it with his fist. He was trying to kill his desire for her, and he succeeded.

Having succeeded, he was free to go. He went, leaving Lorette staring after him in white fury.

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Goldstone again kept conversation general until the cigars were well alight. Then he said quietly: "You want to ask me anything, Oliver?"

"Yes. What guarantee have I that any promises you may make will be kept in seventy-five years?"

"No guarantee, Oliver. I'm not the President of Avanal. You just have to believe what I say."

"Why should I?"

"Because, being the truth, it should sound like the truth. Can't you see how valuable you'll be in Avanal?"

"Suppose the only job I'm offered is at fifty dollars a week? Suppose the Avanal authorities just decide to take all I know from me? How do I know I'm going to get a fair deal?"

"Well," said Goldstone slowly, "if you insist on putting it that way... obviously you could be gypped. In almost any deal with anybody you could be gypped. There has to be a certain amount of trust. Not as much as you seem to think, because if you let me give you facts I can show you that there's no reason why anybody should gyp you."

Oliver let him give him facts. They looked okay. Avanal was slowly developing a robotic industry. Men like Oliver would certainly be needed, and Oliver was aware himself of the difficulties they were going to experience in getting them. The deal smelt all right.

Suspicions about colonies' promises were always on the same lines: there were scores of ways of not keeping them if the colonies chose to use them. And, of course, always:

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immigration agents could tell you only about the world concerned as it was a long time ago, and you'd reach it a long time in the future. A deep-sea diver desperately needed on Simworld might find when he got there that the necessity for deep-sea divers had been circumvented a century ago.

At last, reluctantly, because he had wanted Goldstone to introduce the subject, Oliver said: "You told me that by the time I reach Avanal, if I go, there'll be a woman for every man."

Goldstone nodded.

"That isn't borne out by the official figures," Oliver said. "Colonies are established by men. Few women go out, especially in current circumstances. Those who do bear children, sure, but more and more male settlers go out. You get a situation like ours here on Earth, only worse. It isn't like the old covered-wagon days on Earth, because all you had to do then was build a railroad, open up a new territory, and in a few weeks the women you'd left behind could be out with you."

"You know why there's a shortage of women on Earth, Oliver?" Goldstone said pensively. "Of course you do. At least you know the theories, for nobody's completely certain... Let me talk about it all the same. First, male babies used to die more readily than female babies. That's been whacked and now practically all babies of both sexes live. Second, war and accidents used to kill off more men than women. That's over, too. Most sources of fatal accident have been licked and we don't fight wars because there are no battlegrounds left. Third..."

He paused. "Third," he said still more slowly, "is the real reason, the important one and the one we're not quite certain about. When a population is well fed, more girl babies are born than boys. Well, Earth is well enough fed — but more and more on artificial foods, synthetics, cultures. And though all the nutrition is there, the theory is that something is lacking, something that results in more boys being born than girls. The scientists are working on it, but they haven't whacked that yet. And the two obvious solutions are out. Earth won't legalize abortion of male embryos, and we can't abandon synthetic food. So officially it's a temporary problem, cause uncertain, bound to be corrected in time."

"That's Earth," said Oliver pointedly. "How about Avanal?"

"As you've found out, Avanal's population was predominantly male. But people die. People of both sexes die. If you have twenty million men and one million women, and no intake, seventy years later your population consists entirely of the progeny of the million women. And the sexes are equal."

"Stop there," said Oliver. "That's if there's no intake. But you're still sending out colonists, predominantly male."

"Yes, but the numbers are not large. And Avanal's own population is increasing steadily. In seventy-five years the sexes will be equal."

"And then the same thing will happen as on Earth."

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"Be your age, Oliver. It'll be hundreds of years before Avanal starts using synthetic food — if ever. In Avanal, all the tendencies are the other way. Accidents kill off more men than women. Avanal has scores of problems, sure. But not that one."

They talked for a little longer. Then Oliver suddenly said: "I'll go to Avanal, Tom, if you give me a contract promising I can come back if I like."

"Sorry, Oliver. That's the one thing I can't do."

"Then I don't go."

Goldstone frowned, revealing for a moment his real anxiety. Oliver was interested. Goldstone really wanted him in Avanal. "Look, how could I promise that? You wouldn't really want to come back, would you? And find yourself back on Earth 50 years out of date? A freak? Unemployable?"

"No, I guess I wouldn't. But I still want the guarantee. And if I don't get it, I don't go."

"You want the guarantee even though you don't mean to use it?"

"That's right."

"Why?"

"Because your guarantee that I could come back if I liked would be my guarantee that everything you told me about Avanal is the literal truth."

Goldstone was silent for a moment. Then he said: "That makes sense, Oliver. Wish I could comply. But I can't. If I promised you this, I'd have to promise it to everybody."

Oliver stood up. "Sorry, Tom. You nearly had me. In fact, any time you're prepared to offer what I ask, let me know. I might still be interested."

Goldstone sighed. "Wait, Oliver. Sit down."

"It's time I was back."

"This is more important than being late one day. Your standing with your firm is excellent. It's my business to check on things like that. Sit down, please."

Oliver shrugged and sat down.

"I've got something else to tell you," Goldstone said reluctantly. "Naturally I've been keeping tabs on you . . . I didn't want to mention this, I wanted your free assent. I don't want to suggest any taint of blackmail —"

"Blackmail?"

"Loretta Miller. She's filing assault charges against you."

Oliver stared at him, thunderstruck. "Then you *were* mixed up in —"

"Nonsense, Oliver! Use your head. How could I arrange for Lorette to murder someone and pick you for an alibi and ensure you assaulted her? I found out, that's all. And you're in trouble — woman assault is serious, you know, and there's a chance Lorette will get your case tried before hers. But if you leave for Avanal today —"

"Today?"

"This very night. There's a ship leaving."

"Let me think."

It must, as Goldstone claimed, be coincidence that the two things came up at the same time. There was no way Goldstone could have rigged the whole thing. But evident-

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ly Goldstone was not above taking advantage of the chance to put pressure on him, despite his expressed reluctance.

Woman assault *was* serious. It had to be, in such conditions. Otherwise it would happen a hundred times a day in every street.

Probably at the back of his mind, the night before, Oliver had worked out coolly enough, even in his rage, that for once it should be safe to give Lorette the beating she'd been needing for years. But Lorette had called the bluff.

Perhaps she wanted to divert attention from the charge hanging over her. Perhaps she was cunning enough to see a way to confuse the issue — to make Oliver back her alibi for his own safety, or try to convince the court that Oliver was mixed up in the killing of Susie Donogue.

"No," Oliver said firmly at last. "I'm still not going to Avanal without the guarantee that I can come back if I want. I'm not ashamed of beating up Lorette. When I tell the court the whole story they'll have to believe it. Justice isn't so loaded against the man in the case that Lorette can get away with this. I'll stay and face the music."

Goldstone sighed again. "Okay, Oliver, you win. You'll get the guarantee. I want you on that ship tonight."

IV

There was no difficulty about leaving. Robotics Inc. could rant and rave, but they couldn't lock Oliver up. Nor did their threats mean anything. And it was too late to offer him a fat raise — though they did offer it.

No clearance was needed. The charge against Oliver was not quite serious enough for him to be kept in custody to answer it.

To keep the record straight, he made a voluntary statement about Lorette. The cops were quite friendly when he left headquarters. No one knew better than they did what the real social situation was.

When a man went to Avanal, Earth lost interest in him. He wasn't coming back. He was as good as dead. Legally, he had committed suicide. In the rare event of a man who was married departing without his wife, she was automatically free the moment evidence was received that he had actually left Earth. If he left property, his will became operative.

Oliver took with him Goldstone's guarantee that he could return to Earth if he wished. Goldstone's obvious reluctance to give it to him had convinced Oliver that it meant exactly what it said.

At the spaceport, Oliver was surprised when he was shown to a small bedroom in the terminal building and told to go to sleep.

"We prefer it that way," he was told. "You go to sleep normally and you don't know a thing about the slow-sleep preparations this end or the reviving process the other end. Best all round. That okay, or do you insist on seeing us pump you dry and stick needles into you?"

Oliver didn't insist. He expected

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to have great difficulty in sleeping, but he slept at once . . .

The ship was a vast dormitory. Not only the five hundred colonists slept; the crew, if they were not to spend seventy-five years, or the rest of their lives, whichever was shorter, as night-watchmen, had to sleep too. They spent six months making certain the ship was exactly on course, checking the automatic control, and examining the slow-sleeping colonists to see if any of them had slipped too deep ever to return.

Four of them had. They were tipped into space.

Then the crew slow-slept for seventy-four years, every last one of them. Few of the disasters which might befall the ship could be averted even if men were working the ship.

Six months before arrival, the crew were wakened. They checked their position and everything else. They found that three more colonists would never see Avanal. Three more bodies were pushed out into the void.

Not even when the ship was orbiting around Avanal were the remaining 493 colonists revived. Tenders came up and took them off. One by one they were revived on the planet.

"You're a very swack coy, Mr. Carne," said Dr. Mabler admiringly. "You've been famous here for forty-five years, since the agent's radio message about you came in. First coy to be granted the right to return to Earth. . . . Very swack indeed."

By this time Oliver had little or no difficulty with Avanal talk, thought an occasional new word or colloquialism beat him for the time being. Like all colonies, Avanal was developing first an accent and then a dialect of its own. Academic speech stayed practically unchanged; it was colloquial speech which developed away from the parent tongue.

"Coy" was probably a corruption of "guy." "Swack," meaning clever cute, was of uncertain derivation; or "Zik" was obviously the Avanal form for "chick."

Apart from slowly fading aches and pains, Oliver felt fine. The seventy-five year sleep, he had been told, frequently cured minor ailments which demanded complete rest. And his five-year advance in age didn't show any more. Three days of feeding and controlled exercise had made him as good as new.

"Why swack?" Oliver asked, putting down his magazine.

"Don't be dis, Mr. Carne. No need for modesty. You never really meant to exert your privilege, did you? Nobody gives up ten years of his life just to see another planet."

"No, I didn't mean to use it," Oliver admitted.

"That's what I thought, Swack. You did it to put up your value. A man who charges nothing for his services is worth nothing — at least, that's what the average coy thinks. Charge millions . . . and you must be worth millions. You made yourself valuable even before you got here."

Oliver opened his mouth to explain that his real reason had been slightly different. He changed his

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mind. If Mabler thought he was smart to do things the way he'd done them, let him go on thinking so.

"When do I get out of here?" Oliver asked.

"A man from the Robotics Foundation is coming over this afternoon. You can make arrangements with him. As far as we're concerned, you can leave any time."

The doctor made the three-finger salute peculiar to Avanal and went out through the swing door.

Oliver was in a small private room in the Central Hospital. He had seen only Mabler and two elderly nurses so far. Of Avan, Avanal's capital city, he had seen nothing except in magazine photographs.

But it seemed that Tom Goldstone, who had been dead for quite a few years now, had told him nothing but the truth.

Avanal was prosperous, eager, expanding. There were slightly more women than men. And the Robotics Foundation chief was Roger Brest, the Terran technician who had arrived in Avanal twenty years before Oliver — a fact which indicated that Oliver himself might well be the next chief.

Oliver's impression that things were going his way was strengthened when it turned out that his visitor from the Robotics Foundation was Roger Brest himself.

Brest was a small, dapper man in his early fifties. He shook hands with Oliver very quickly, as if afraid of contamination, and sat down abruptly.

"Carne," he said, "the doctor tells me you're champ. You can start work at the Foundation tomorrow. Now, what I want you to do is list the main developments in robotic practice in the twenty years since I left Earth. You can do that, of course?"

"Yes," said Oliver slowly. "Yes, I can do that."

"Good. You can sleep here tonight and call at the Foundation the moment you're signed out. It's only five minutes' walk from here. I'll be busy, but if you announce yourself you'll be shown to your room and your secretary will tell you anything you want to know. Champ?"

Oliver hesitated. His main bargaining lever was the knowledge he possessed that Brest did not. It seemed a trifle cool to expect him to hand it all over in the first five minutes, so to speak, before even discovering how he stood in Avanal and with the Robotics Foundation in particular.

"Do I get a contract?" he asked warily.

Brest seemed surprised. "We have a monopoly, Carne. There's no one else you can work for. Your value to the Foundation won't be established for several weeks, perhaps months. It may be small or it may be immense. A contract at this stage would be neither to your ultimate advantage nor to ours."

"I don't have any choice, then? I have to do as I'm told?"

Brest was even more surprised. "You came here to work for the Foundation, Carne. One presumes your choice was made long ago."

"But I can go back to Earth."

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"You can't expect us to be impressed here by that piece of grandstanding," said Brest stiffly. "Kindly stop being dis, Carne."

"It's not grandstanding. The privilege is genuine. They've told me that here. If I don't like what I see I can go back."

Brest stood up. "I really don't understand you, Carne. Perhaps you don't like my face. That shouldn't prevent us from working together. But your present attitude is most unpromising."

"Well, I simply feel I ought to have some kind of reasonable guarantee—"

Brest looked at his watch. "I'm sorry you feel that way, Carne. People who want a guarantee before they condescend to take a glance at their place of employment aren't much use in Avanal. However... Well, I don't think I have anything more to say."

He scurried out, without the three-finger salute.

Next morning Oliver left the hospital at nine dressed in natty white suit but without a coin in his pocket. So far nobody had mentioned money.

He found himself in a wide concrete street with surprisingly little traffic and few pedestrians. He had thought of Avan as a busy, bustling city. At nine o'clock, at least, it was not.

The temperature was high, for this was the second S-day.

Avanal had a fifty-hour day. Humans being incapable of working for twenty-five hours and sleeping for twenty-five, the Avanal pattern was two S-days and one S-night (S for sun), followed by two N-nights and one N-day (N for night). Thus, in 8 hour 20 minute periods, the schedule ran: S-day, S-night, S-day, N-night, N-day, N-night, *ad infinitum*.

Temperature ranged very much as on Earth, only over a longer period and with greater extremes. The first N-night started warm and got gradually colder. The N-day was a freezer, spent in indoor leisure by as many people as possible. The second N-night stayed cold, and so did the morning of the first S-day. By afternoon the temperature was quite high, and the S-night could be nearly as uncomfortable as the N-day. The second S-day was hot in the morning, and warm all through.

Oliver had wondered at first why a less clumsy nomenclature had never evolved, but he soon realized that the schedule was so taken for granted that it was seldom necessary to talk about it. Everybody knew automatically what the next few days would be, and if they were planning anything weeks ahead, reference to any calendar or diary showed at once whether the 23rd was a first or second S-day or an N-day.

Anyway, it was hot and very few people were about. Oliver stopped one coy who was and asked the way to the Robotics Foundation.

The man grinned. "You must be Oliver Carne. See that avenue over there? Go along it and look on the left."

Since he did not at once hurry on and seemed friendly, Oliver remarked: "Not many people about."

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"Huh? Town's busy."

"Is it? Oh well, I guess I'll get used to things in a day or two."

"You're a lucky coy. The ziks will swarm you."

"Will they? Why?"

"Cause you're famous. You're the coy who can go back to Earth if you like. Me, I wouldn't mind seeing Earth."

Oliver, a glazed look on his face, was staring at three girls passing. They were tall, pretty, laughing, well-stacked. Their shorts and halters left nothing to the imagination.

"You're missing nothing," Oliver said, noticing that the man didn't even glance at the three girls. On Earth, three such girls would never be seen laughing together, arm-in-arm. They would be queening it over three jealously guarded territories of their own.

Awkwardly he returned the Avanian's three-finger salute and strolled on.

The Robotics Foundation was a huge concrete building with wide steps leading up to it. Oliver ran up the steps, pleased to find that Avanal's fractionally greater gravity posed no problems.

He was not surprised to find a neatly dressed woman at the inquiry desk, although on Earth there were few female receptionists. "I'm Oliver Carne," he said.

She smiled. "Please take the elevator to the fourth floor. Go to room 47. You"ll find Miss Fulstone there."

Oliver resisted the impulse to ask what he was supposed to do with Miss Fulstone.

The Robotics Foundation, or the small part of it he saw on his way to room 47, looked rather like the hospital he had just left. He saw no machinery and no workers who didn't look like hospital orderlies. He certainly saw no robots.

He was trying to make up his mind whether the way he was being treated indicated he was as important as Goldstone had made out he would be, or if Brest merely meant to pick his brains and then shunt him into a dead-end department. He still suspected the latter.

Room 47 strengthened this view. The outer office contained a typist's desk and one chair. The inner office, a mere cubicle, had a desk naked except for a telephone, a fairly comfortable chair behind it, and two other chairs, not very comfortable and obviously not meant for the use of high executives.

Of Miss Fulstone there was no sign.

He sat behind his desk and opened the drawers. They contained nothing but pencils, paper, pens and virgin folders.

A girl entered. "Mr. Carne? I'm Vera Fulstone."

Oliver looked up. So did the general situation. Miss Fulstone was a dazzling twenty-two, and her strong, lean figure did things to her plain green dress which Oliver had never seen done to a dress before.

"Pleased," he said with great sincerity, "to meet you. I have about a million questions."

"I'll be glad to help you."

Oliver beamed. He certainly could use her help.

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V

Vera was in fact able to tell Oliver nearly all he wanted to know.

He would receive a standard salary of five hundred Avanal talers a month. To give him some idea of what this meant, Vera told him that a good meal cost three talers and a modest furnished apartment one-fifty a month. He would not be rich but he wouldn't starve either.

After three months his record would be reviewed. There were no promises about what would happen, only that there would be a review.

Meantime he was allotted no job job other than preparing a survey of Earth's advance in the field during the last twenty years. He was to produce first a summary and then a detailed report. No time-limit was set. Indeed, it was suggested that he take things easy for a week, finding out about conditions on Avanal generally before concentrating on his work for the Robotic Foundation. Nevertheless, it was thought that in a week or less his preliminary survey could be ready.

" 'It is thought,' " Oliver quoted. "By whom? Mr. Roger Brest?"

Vera raised her exquisite eyebrows. "Naturally Mr. Brest briefed me."

"Naturally."

"This Foundation probably isn't like what you've been used to on Earth, Mr. Carne. There aren't half a dozen managers and a managing director and a board of directors and a committee of shareholders — have I got that right? Mr. Brest is supposed to be in charge of the whole project. And he *is* in charge. He doesn't have to answer to anybody except the government. And any important matter, like the use to be made of your special knowledge, he would automatically handle himself."

"So I'm an important matter, am I? I guess that's something."

Vera frowned, apparently puzzled by his attitude.

"Look, suppose I get you to show me around a little right now — outside, I mean? Is that all right? Is that in accordance with the instructions of Mr. Roger Almighty Brest?"

Vera closed the notebook which she had tentatively opened. "Of course, Mr. Carne. Considering you came straight here from the hospital, it might be a very good idea."

She showed him to the room next door. To his surprise he found it was a small but comfortable bedroom with a tiny bathroom next door. "This is yours too," she said. "You might want to wash. Anyway, I'll have to change."

"Here?" he said, startled.

She smiled. "I have a bedroom on the other side of the offices. Oh — I don't suppose you understand . . . Avanal's climate makes it desirable to have a bedroom right where you work. The climate and the conditions. You see, days off are generally taken by rota. If you're working here both S-days, you only have eight hours twenty minutes between your two working days — hardly time to go home, have dinner, do anything worth while doing, get a good night's sleep and come back

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here. So you sleep here. Or if you're working on an N-day, you might find it convenient to spend both N-nights here."

Oliver nodded. This made sense.

"Well, if you'll excuse me, I'll go and change," Vera said. She closed the door quietly behind her.

Oliver didn't wash, having done so barely an hour earlier, and he couldn't change, having nothing to change into. He spent the time frowningly considering his position with the Robotics Foundation.

For better or for worse he was evidently under the thumb of Roger Brest. Oliver had not yet found out how Brest had gained complete control of the Foundation. Had he been treated, twenty years ago, exactly as Oliver was being treated now, or had things been different then? Had Roger Brest stepped easily into complete command of robotics on Avanal, and had he prudently made sure that history didn't repeat itself when Oliver Carne arrived from Earth?

Assuming Brest was competent, Oliver could take it for granted that if he prepared the report he was supposed to prepare, Brest would be able in a matter of days to catch up with Terran robotic practice in the last twenty years. In other words, any advantage Oliver possessed would be dissipated and Brest could kick him out if he felt like it. Or, more likely, give him a dead-end job.

"Come in," Oliver called as he heard a tap on the door. Vera did, and he was disappointed. He had thought she was going to change into something very gay. Instead she wore a gray smock which was decidedly less attractive than her green dress.

They went down in the elevator. In the hall, Vera left him for a moment and came back with an envelope. "A month's salary," she said. "It's not an advance. You're to consider it a signing-on bonus. You'll need clothes and a lot of other things."

"Thanks," said Oliver, taking the envelope. But she had already left him again, entering the women's cloakroom at the door. He went on outside and waited on the steps.

When she joined him in the sunshine he hardly recognized her, and it was instantly clear that her manner had completely changed. Inside the Foundation she had played the part of the coolly efficient secretary to the best of her ability, friendly enough but cool rather than intimate. She had called him Mr. Carne, and everything she said was conscientiously loyal to the Foundation.

Outside, in a scarlet and white sun top and thin, brief scarlet shorts, smiling easily and calling him Oliver, she was so different that within half a minute he asked curiously: "Are the rooms in the Foundation monitored? I mean, are there scanners in every room?"

She laughed. "No, you've got it wrong, Oliver. Here in Avan we work hard and play hard. We may work voluntary unpaid overtime, but we don't take our work home. Inside the Foundation, nothing matters but robotics. Outside, the Foundation is a yell, a grind. It isn't swack

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to mention it. Of course, in your case it's champ. You want to know about everything. But in a week or two you'll find you never even think about robotics outside the Foundation."

"I get it. And the moment we go back inside, you call me Mr. Carne again?"

"Champ, Oliver. Same goes for you. You call me Miss Fulstone in the Foundation."

"Which means I can call you Vera now?"

"Sure," she said, surprised at the question.

They had a day the like of which Oliver had never experienced in his life. They rode in buses, did some shopping, bathed at a river pool, danced at an open-air dance-floor, ate fried chicken, sunbathed on the highest roof in Avan, looked in at the main library, listened to jazz in a park, took a canoe out on the river, and finally dined at a restaurant.

All the time Vera was easy and friendly without a hint either of archness or of hands-off repressiveness. She told him casually, in passing, that she had no steady boyfriend. When they danced she was warmly co-operative without inviting greater intimacy.

Completely lacking was any breath of the usual Terran female attitude: *I am a pearl of great price and don't you forget it. I've let you date me but I had a hundred other offers.*

He found himself asking about her parents. She answered at once: "My father's an engineer. He'll be away for six months, but my mother's at home — want to meet her?"

"Later, perhaps," he said. "In a day or two."

"Champ. Having fun?"

"How could a coy help it when he's with you?"

She laughed, clearly not taking the compliment seriously.

Most of the day the people they saw were in clothes as brief as Vera's. In the evening, however, during the long sunset, the chill of Avanal's twenty-five-hour night began to spread its shadow over the city. Vera stuck to her playclothes longer than most people, but just before they dined she called at the Foundation again to change into a slightly less bare evening dress.

After the meal she said firmly: "Now we go home. At least, I go home. You go to the Foundation until you've found somewhere to stay."

"Already?" he said, disappointed.

"Already. I thought I'd better put you straight on that, because a friend of mine had a little trouble last night with a coy from your ship. He wanted to paint the town red all night. We don't do that here."

"Don't you? I thought you worked hard and played hard?"

"Sure, but we're working tomorrow, aren't we? We might as well, because it's N-day. Well, remember we're on eight-hour periods here. We're going to be working just over eight hours from now."

He saw the point. To get two days into the twenty-five hours of daylight, the schedule that was worked was the only one possible.

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So he took her home. The way she waited showed she expected to be kissed. But the way she firmly said, "Good night, Oliver," when he had done so, showed that that was that.

All in all, he wasn't sorry he had come to Avanal.

The doubts came back the next day — the first "day" he had experienced which was black as pitch and well below freezing. Still, it didn't matter inside the Foundation building, which was heated through the long night and cooled through the long day. Oliver didn't even look out at Avanal. He was too busy.

Stalling was not going to get him anywhere. Brest would simply send for him and ask coldly when he proposed to start working. Telling lies wasn't going to get him anywhere either. Guarded questioning of Vera indicated that Brest was a hot-shot robotics engineer.

So he dictated a straight, truthful summary.

The main advances in the last twenty years had all been in the direction of further automation. A robot was a machine to do certain jobs with only casual supervision. A better robot was a machine which could do more jobs with still less supervision. A perfect robot would be a machine which could do all jobs with no supervision at all.

The next thing was maintenance. A simple robot needed constant checking. A more complicated robot could check itself. A still more complicated robot could carry out its own repairs.

Then there was coordination. In the beginning, robots were independent, cooperation being a matter for human controllers. Later, robots worked together. Still later, robot control operated robotic units.

Finally, a measure of automatic assessment came in. Originally humans surveyed all jobs, decided what was to be done and gave robots precise directions. Better robots needed less control. In the end a robot would survey the situation, decide on the necessary measures and how to carry them out, set self-maintaining robots to do the work, and inspect the completed job.

Oliver dictated a summary of the results which had been achieved without detailing the manner of achievement. In this way he retained for the time being his own potential value. Not until he described actual techniques would he be surrendering anything to Brest.

Vera, dressed in sober gray, calling him Mr. Carne and apparently never letting even her thoughts stray from the work in hand, was like the elder sister of the gorgeous creature with whom he had spent the previous day.

Working a heavy day with only short breaks for meals in the canteen, where Oliver didn't take time out to meet any of his new colleagues, they completed the summary in one day and sent it by chute to Roger Brest's office.

Then, exhausted, they flopped in their respective rooms. Oliver made only a tentative, exploratory effort to share a room with Vera. Her reaction, unshocked but rock-firm,

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showed that such efforts should not be made inside the Foundation. Although there was no promise that the result would be any different outside the Foundation, Vera made it clear that the attempt would be far more appropriate.

Having taken one day off and worked one day which might not unreasonably be considered worth two day's work, Oliver suggested another morning of mixed exploration and leisure.

Vera seemed to think this a good idea, though her reaction showed she expected work to resume that afternoon.

The morning of the first S-day proved a disappointment. The city was still defrosting. Apart from some skating on the lakes there were no interesting leisure activities in session. The Avanians, used to heat one day in three, preferred summer to winter sports as a general rule.

Oliver knew now why traffic in the city was so light. Nearly everybody had two bedrooms, one in what he called home and one, strictly functional, at work. The effect was that travel was considerably reduced. A third of the working population didn't have to travel to work, being already there. A third didn't have to go home, being already there. Only the third which was switching from one group to the other, or going to work for a single day, intending to return, had to use any facilities for travel.

One thing was warm that cold morning: that flower of Avanal named Vera Fulstone.

Oliver had now been constantly in her company, except when they were asleep, for nearly forty hours. It was hardly a long acquaintance, yet they felt they knew each other very well.

Oliver guessed that Vera had reserved judgment until the N-day they spent working like slaves. Evidently she liked a good worker and respected a man who knew his job. By noon this third day in her company Oliver began to realize the astounding truth: this could be his girl.

It was not surprising that they had not yet had any rows. They were not over-familiar with each other yet, and no habit of either of them had begun to irritate the other. They had established a few of the things they had in common and a few interest which they did not share.

Their professional relationship, Oliver had discovered, was neither a barrier to outside intimacy nor an inducement. The Avanians' strict division of their time into work and play enabled men and women who were lovers to work together comfortably in business hours, and helped men and women who were close partners during working time to forget each others' very existence once they went home.

What Oliver was realizing, difficult though it was for him to accept, was that Vera really had no steady boy-friend, that she was neither desperate to remedy this nor shy of male company, that so far she liked what she had seen of him, and that unless he made a bad blunder, or unless they discovered some very important circumstance which made

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them quite incompatible, their acquaintance would develop easily into . . .

"What are you thinking, Oliver?" Vera demanded.

He had discovered that boldness paid off with her — not brutal frankness, but a slightly toned-down version of the literal truth.

"I was wondering at my good luck in meeting you first crack out of the box," he said.

"Good luck? How was it luck?"

They were sitting in a wintry park, dressed in woolens which were gradually becoming too warm. It was now almost noon. They had sheltered from a sleet shower which had changed to rain and then steamy rain.

"Well . . . being allotted a secretary, and finding she was a girl like you."

Vera still didn't quite follow. "You couldn't be given a moron. Modesty apart . . . Mr. Brest knows that you may be valuable, he had to give you a bright, intelligent, efficient girl as your secretary — well, why shouldn't I blow my own trumpet? Nobody else will. She couldn't be old, for you're only twenty-eight . . . or twenty-three, depending how you look at it, and a man doesn't like his secretary to be older than he is. So your secretary had to be bright, intelligent, efficient and around twenty. The fact that I'm also ravishingly beautiful is just an added bonus. Ha-ha."

"You *are* ravishingly beautiful."

She laughed, genuinely this time. "I've got a good figure, I know that. But beautiful? Oh, well, don't let me talk you out of it. Seriously, what did you expect?"

"A male assistant, if I got one at all."

"Oh — I see what you mean. But granted you got a girl secretary, why be surprised it's me? What's remarkable about me?"

"That you're available," he said frankly.

She shrugged. "I told you about that. I was practically engaged to a miner, Stan Smith. He went to Funt, ten thousand miles away. We wrote . . . then we didn't write, and finally we wrote one letter each agreeing it was all off, and no hard feelings. You just came along before I found anybody else. It had to be you or some other coy."

Glad that it was him, Oliver jumped up: "Let's have lunch and go on the river afterwards," he said.

She looked doubtful. "Aren't we going back to the Foundation?"

"When we start again we've got a lot of hard, dull grind. We'll do it tomorrow."

She shrugged again. "Champ. You're the boss."

IV

Oliver, with Vera's help, found a modest apartment and slept in it that night — after establishing, to his delight, that the second time he took Vera home slightly greater liberties were not merely permitted but expected.

When he arrived at room 317 the next day, having overslept, he found no Vera. But there was a note on his desk:

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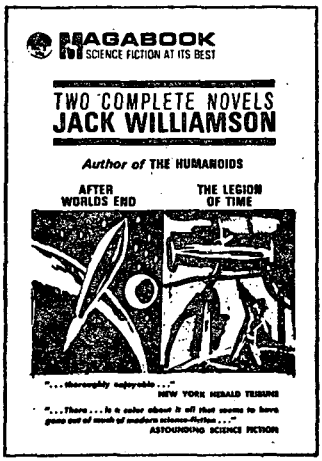

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Sent for you several times yesterday but you didn't come in. Please come and see me as soon as you get this.

Roger Brest.

A frown settled on Oliver's brow. Brest undoubtedly was the fly in the ointment. Things were fixed so that Oliver's whole future depended on Brest. Brest, like Angela, like Lorette, like Tom Goldstone, like the Avanal authorities, could gyp him if he happened to feel like it. Did a man never get independence? Was there no way of winning security, arranging insurance against a swift poke in the guts?

Sometimes you were gypped, sometimes you weren't — but apparently you always *could* be.

Today, when he and Vera got down to work, he'd be making it possible, indeed making it easy, for Brest to poke him in the guts if he felt so inclined.

Oliver inquired for Brest's room and when he found it he also found Vera. She was with Brest. When Oliver arrived she got up silently and went out without catching his eye.

Icy fingers clutched at Oliver's heart. Vera and Brest? She had admitted Brest had briefed her, had chosen her as Oliver's secretary . . .

"Sit down, Carne," said Brest. Behind his desk he was no bigger. He was still dapper, still cool.

"I've got your summary here," Brest said. "A good job. Obviously you know your business, Carne. Unfortunately . . ."

He paused — sadistically, Oliver thought. Unfortunately what? If he had done a good job, what could possibly be unfortunate about it?

"Unfortunately," Brest said a last, looking up and meeting Oliver's eyes squarely, "none of the information you can supply is of the slightest use to us."

Oliver gaped. Was this some subtle way of discounting him? Of buying everything he had to sell for a song, saying it was worth even less?

"It might be advisable to say as little as possible," Brest said. "I know what this must mean to you. If you say anything at all, it's liable to be something we might both regret later. You, possibly, more than me. So be patient and just listen.

"As you will admit, Earth's recent developments in our field have all been in the direction of greater control by robotic relays and less by human operators. Now Avanal is a younger world, a busier yet less complex world. We have no great need of machines to do dull, complicated, highly specialized jobs. We have great need of machines which are adaptable, which, under human control, can tackle huge, uncomplicated operations. Fundamentally we are more concerned with large-scale shaping than small, intricate finishing work."

He paused and then said dryly: "Although I did not wish to instruct you, I had hoped that you would find out a little about current robotic practice here and report on Terran advances in relation to this. I gather, however, that you pre-

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ferred to limit your . . . ah . . . exploration to fields outside robotics."

It was hard for Oliver to contain himself, but he managed it. The real trouble was that what Brest was saying sounded as if it made sense. Terran robotics had reached the stage of refining and re-refining; like human knowledge, it tended toward knowing more and more about less and less.

When Oliver thought of the real triumphs of robotics in the twenty years which were his special field, he realized they were all in areas which would not be exploited in a world like Avanal for a long time. What need had Avanal of robotic traffic control? Of robotic communications, filing, food manufacture, animal husbandry, mineral reclamation?

Avanal was practically untapped. Earth was practically exhausted. No wonder robotics on the two worlds was going in different directions.

Bleakly he realized that Vera had told Brest everything she knew. She was Brest's spy.

"Perhaps I should soften this in some way," Brest was saying, "but you had better face the truth, Carne. You'll have to do it before you can be of any use to us. Naturally I still want you to go ahead and make a full report on what you have summarized here, but —"

"Naturally," Oliver said. It was the first word he had said since entering Brest's office.

"Yes. It would be better if you had a quick glance at Avanal practice in robotics before you embark on this. Miss Fulstone would be able to arrange this, if you were to ask her. Then . . ."

Brest said more, but Oliver heard nothing. He had received the poke in the guts he expected.

Confused impressions danced grotesquely through his mind. Vera being appointed as his secretary, by Roger Brest, before he, Oliver, knew that Vera existed. An intelligent, loyal girl whom Brest could trust . . . a pretty girl whom the stupid, sex-starved Oliver Carne would idolize. Goldstone telling him how valuable he'd be in Avanal, practically guaranteed an unlimited supply of blank checks, probably in time the director of robotics for the whole planet. Vera trying to get him to work, doubtful when he insisted on taking more time off, not giving him a hint of what was waiting for him.

And behind all this, the grain of truth in what Brest was saying. More than a grain, perhaps.

Well, there was one way of finding out.

When Brest in his usual cold way gave him to understand that the interview was over, Oliver, having said just one word, went back to room 417.

Vera looked up guardedly, said nothing.

"In case you're interested, we're not working today either," Oliver said. "You can come with me if you like."

She dropped the formality of business hours. "I know you've had a big disappointment, Oliver. But don't let it throw you. I know already you're swack. You can start over.

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And in six months, even three months —"

"Coming?" he said shortly.

Again it was the hot second S-day morning. Again she changed, covering her pretties with a smock until they were outside. But this time when she revealed herself in a yellow plunge bra and short frilly blue pants he saw someone different, someone foreign. She might have been Lorette, trying to buy him in the most obvious, provocative, grossly sensual way. He was not going to be bought — being something more than an animal.

Vera, like Lorette, was not for him.

He didn't have to ask directions. He had already passed the building he wanted and had it identified for him.

When she saw where they were headed, Vera stopped abruptly and said: "You're bluffing, Oliver. You're angry I even spoke to Mr. Brest and now you want to show everybody —"

"I've got the right," he said curtly. "And what good am I here?"

"That's what I was going to ask," she said quietly. "If that's where you're going, why am I here?"

"So that you can go back and tell Brest," he said cruelly, and plunged forward without her.

It was quite easy to reach a man in authority. Within ten minutes he was closeted with Edgar Thom, the immigration chief.

Thom, a huge, solid man with red hair, was not unfriendly. "Yes, you weren't misinformed, Mr. Carne. You can go back to Earth if you wish. And it's true that the ship you came on leaves at the end of the week. But aren't you being rather hasty? You've been here just —"

"Just long enough to find out that I'm scuppered," Oliver said harshly. "In my own field I can only work for one organization, one man. I don't like the man, he doesn't like me, and I've just learned that none of the special knowledge that I brought with me, that I came here to bring, is worth a damn."

"That may be, Mr. Carne, but . . . Haven't you found advantages here? Most of the others who came with you have already —"

"Yes, there are advantages. At a price. A man needs two things in life — a job that suits him, and a livable social environment. You've got the environment, Earth's got the job. There I had one, here I could have the other. Nowhere, apparently, can I have both."

Thom smiled sympathetically. "You're bitter, Mr. Carne. Don't you think —"

"Listen, Mr. Thom, have you never met a guy whose mind was made up before? I mean, a coy. I admit there's still one thing I'm interested in, one thing that might make a difference. If it turns out I really do have a place here, I might still stay. But to find that out, I have to be fully prepared to go."

Thom looked bewildered, as well he might. Oliver didn't really believe that Brest would crack and admit he could use Oliver's special knowledge. Maybe it was 100 per cent true that Brest couldn't use it. But

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this was Oliver's last hope of having his cake and eating it too.

"I really mean it, Mr. Thom," he said.

Thom tried another angle. "Have you thought about what you're going to do on Earth? Your speciality will be 'way out of date there —"

"Yes, I've thought. I'll be a man from 50 years back. I'll be able to use that somehow. History, sociology, biology —"

Thom laughed, a full-bodied bellow. "Sorry, son," he said, trying to control it. "That was rude. But haven't you realized? The crew of the deep-space ships milk that line dry. Some of them know the Earth of 300 years ago."

Oliver was silent. Another slight kick in the guts. Of course, on Earth he'd never heard anything about men who knew the Earth of three centuries ago. They were too common. They weren't news.

Spacemen could tell anyone who was interested about the Avanal of seventy-five years back, the Earth of 150 years back, but that wasn't hot news. They weren't worth television time.

It didn't matter. It was just another thing he should have expected. He had always liked to think things over cautiously. He should never have let Tom Goldstone talk him into coming to Avanal.

Perhaps it was telepathy. Thom suddenly snapped his fingers. "Goldstone!" he exclaimed. "It was Goldstone who sent you here, wasn't it?"

"Sure," said Oliver. "Promise-the-moon Goldstone."

"I've just remembered. Goldstone's dead now, of course. Died forty years ago. But he sent you a message. To be given to you if you really considered going back to Earth. Wait, I'll get it. It came on the ship with you."

Oliver was left alone. Curiosity about what Goldstone had thought it worth while telling him relieved for the first time that day his mood of angry gloom. Had the Lorette business been fixed after all? Or was there still another poke in the guts to come? Was he going to be in trouble over Lorette if he went back to Earth, even a century and a half later?

Thom was back. "Here you are," he said, thrusting a typed letter into Oliver's hand. It read:

Dear Oliver,

I really did like you. I wanted you for Avanal. Now that I'm dead, now that you're planning to use the promise you wrung out of me, I want you to know you only got it because I liked you and wanted you for Avanal.

As an impartial observer here on Earth I've met a lot of fellows like you, and that's how I know why you're thinking of coming back to Earth, why it was so difficult to make you go to Avanal in the first place.

It's Earth's lopsided pattern, Oliver. A man needs women. If he has to fight for them, to cheat and lie and steal for them, knowing that the other

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guy is cheating and lying and stealing to take them away from him, he develops a certain kind of insecurity and suspicion.

Your kind of insecurity and suspicion, Oliver.

You're a nice guy, which is why I want you to stay where you are. Your insecurity and suspicion isn't really yours at all, it's been imposed on you. That's why you wouldn't believe what I told you and why you now believe Avanal has somehow cheated you.

It hasn't, Oliver. You've hit a snag, that's all. I can't guess what it is but I know it isn't important. What's important is that you should fight your own feeling that people are cheating and lying and stealing to take what you need away from you.

Luckily for me I'm not a young man any more. For I'm living in a sick world, a world so sick that although it knows its sickness it hasn't chased down and identified all the symptoms.

Maybe by this time Earth is okay again. But don't count on it, Oliver. Stay where you are. Stay on Avanal.

Good luck.

Tom.

Oliver looked up. He had always needed time to think things out. He needed time now.

"Can I keep this?" he asked.

"Sure. It's yours. Private and confidential."

Oliver got up. Thom did not ask him if he was still going back to Earth.

Without saying goodby, Oliver wandered along the corridors, seeking the way out without wishing to ask directions.

He couldn't accept it all at once, couldn't suddenly believe that everyone was his friend and become the most unsuspicious, credulous character in the galaxy.

But for once he *wanted* to believe something. He wanted to believe that Tom Goldstone had really liked him, had sent him to Avanal because he honestly thought it would be a good thing for Avanal and for Oliver Carne.

For the first time, Oliver guessed that Roger Brest was a solitary, shy man who had made robotics his life. He wasn't really cold or cruel. He just found dealing with people, rather than robots, difficult. Especially young, eager, suspicious, insecure men who believed jealously, angrily, that they knew it all.

Oliver found the way out at last. And in front of the building, to his incredulous joy, he found Vera still waiting.

She was beautiful. She was far more than that, for when he ran to her and looked into her face, he saw she was crying.

She was his girl.

END

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THE GREAT SLOW KINGS

BY ROGER ZELAZNY

Immortality? A blessing, to be sure . . . but it may have a few disadvantages!

Drax and Dran sat in the great Throne Hall of Glan, discussing life. Monarchs by virtue of superior intellect and physique — and the fact that they were the last two survivors of the race of Glan — theirs was a divided rule over the planet and their one subject, Zindrome, the palace robot.

Drax had been musing for the past four centuries (theirs was a sluggish sort) over the possibility of life on other planets in the galaxy.

Accordingly, "Dran," said he, addressing the other (who was becoming mildly curious as to his thoughts), "Dran, I've been thinking: There may be life on other planets in the galaxy."

Dran considered his reply to this, as the world wheeled several times about its sun.

"True," he finally agreed, "there may."

After several months Drax shot back, "If there is, we ought to find out."

"Why?" asked Dran with equal

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promptness, which caused the other to suspect that he, too, had been thinking along these lines.

So he measured his next statement out cautiously, first testing each word within the plated retort of his reptilian skull.

"Our kingdom is rather underpopulated at present," he observed. "It would be good to have many subjects once more."

Dran regarded him askance, then slowly turned his head. He closed one eye and half-closed the other, taking full stock of his co-ruler, whose appearance, as he suspected, was unchanged since the last time he had looked.

"That, also, is true," he noted. "What do you suggest we do?"

This time Drax turned, reapprais-ing him, eye to eye.

"I think we ought to find out if there is life on other planets in the galaxy."

"Hmm."

Two quick roundings of the seasons went unnoticed, then, "Let me think about it," he said, and turned away.

After what he deemed a polite period of time, Drax coughed.

"Have you thought sufficiently?"

"No."

Drax struggled to focus his eyes on the near-subliminal streak of bluish light which traversed, re-traversed and re-re-traversed the Hall as he waited.

"Zindrome!" he finally called out.

The robot slowed his movements to a statue-like immobility to accommodate his master. A feather duster protruded from his right limb.

"You called, great Lord of Glan?"

"Yes, Zindrome, worthy subject. Those old spaceships which we constructed in happier days, and never got around to using. Are any of them still capable of operation?"

"I'll check, great Lord."

He seemed to change position slightly.

"There are three hundred eighty-two," he announced, "of which four are in functioning condition, great Lord. II've checked all the operating circuits."

"Drax," warned Dran, "you are arrogating unauthorized powers to yourself once more. You should have conferred with me before issuing that order."

"I apologize," stated the other. "I simply wanted to expedite matters, should your decision be that we conduct a survey."

"You have anticipated my decision correctly," nodded Dran, "but your eagerness seems to bespeak a hidden purpose."

"No purpose but the good of the realm," smiled the other.

"That may be, but the last time you spoke of 'the good of the realm' the civil strife which ensued cost us our other robot."

"I have learned my lesson and profited thereby. I shall be more judicious in the future."

"I hope so. Now, about this expedition — which part of the galaxy do you intend to investigate first?"

A tension-filled pause ensued.

"I had assumed," murmured Drax, "that you would conduct the expedi-

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tion. Being the more mature monarch, yours should be a more adequate decision as to whether or not a particular species is worthy of our enlightened rule."

"Yes, but your youth tends to make you more active than I. The journey should be more expeditiously conducted by you." He emphasized the word "expeditiously."

"We could both go, in separate ships," offered Drax. "That would be truly expeditious —"

Their heated debating was cut short by a metallic cough-equivalent.

"Masters," shuggested Zindrome, "the half-life of radioactive materials being as ephemeral as it is, I regret to report that only one spaceship is now in operational condition."

"That settles it, Dran. *You* go. It will require a steadier *rrand* to manage an underpowered ship."

"And leave you to foment civil strife and usurp unfranchised powers? No, you go!"

"I suppose we could *both* go," sighed Drax.

"Fine! Leave the kingdom leaderless! *That* is the kind of muddleheaded thinking which brought about our present political embarrassment."

"Masters," said Zindrome, "if *someone* doesn't go soon the ship will be useless."

They both studied their servant, approving the rapid chain of logic forged by his simple statement.

"Very well," they smiled in unison "*you* go."

Zindrome bowed quite obsequiously and departed from the great Throne Hall of Glan.

"Perhaps we should authorize Zindrome to construct facsimiles of himself," stated Dran, tentatively. "If we had more subjects we could accomplish more."

"Are you forgetting our most recent agreement?" asked Drax. "A superfluity of robots tended to stimulate factionalism last time — and certain people grew ambitious . . ." He let his voice trail off over the years, for emphasis.

"I am not certain as to whether your last allusion contains a hidden accusation," began the other carefully. "If so, permit me to caution you concerning rashness — and to remind you who it was who engineered the Mono-Robot Protection Pact."

"Do you believe things will be different in the case of a multitude of organic subjects?" inquired the other.

"Definitely," said Dran. "There is a certain irrational element in the rationale of the organic being, making it less amenable to direct orders than a machine would be. Our robots, at least, were faithful when we ordered them to destroy one another. Irresponsible organic subjects either do it without being told, which is boorish, or refuse to do it when you order them, which is insubordination."

"True," smiled Drax, unearthing a gem he had preserved for milennia against this occasion. "Concerning organic life the only statement which can be made with certainty is that life is uncertain."

"Hmm." Dran narrowed his eyes to slits. "Let me ponder that a moment. Like much of your thinking

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it seems to smack of a concealed sophistry."

"It contains none, I assure you. It is the fruit of much meditation."

"Hmm."

Dran's pondering was cut short, by the arrival of Zindrome who clutched two brownish blurs beneath his metal arms.

"Back already, Zindrome? What have you there? Slow them down so we can see them."

"They are under sedation at present, great Masters. It is the movements caused by their breathing which produce the unpleasant vibration pattern on your retinas. To subject them to more narcosis could prove deleterious."

"Nevertheless," maintained Dran, "we must appraise our new subjects carefully, which requires that we see them. Slow them down some more."

"You gave that order without —" began Drux, but was distracted by the sudden appearance of the two hairy bipeds.

"Warm-blooded?" he asked.

"Yes, Lord."

"That bespeaks a very brief lifespan."

"True," offered Dran, "but that kind tends to reproduce quite rayidly."

"That observation tends to be correct," nodded Drax. "Tell me, Sindrome, do they represent the sexes necessary for reproduction?"

"Yes, Master. There are two sexes among these anthropoids, so I brought one of each."

"That was very wise. Where did you find them?"

"Several billion light years from here."

"Turn these two loose outside and go fetch us some more."

The creatures vanished. Zindrome appeared not to have moved.

"Have you the fuel necessary for another such journey?"

"Yes, my Lord. More of it has evolved recently."

"Excellent."

The robot departed.

"What sort of governmental setup should we inaugurate this time?" asked Drax.

"Let us review the arguments for the various types."

"A good idea."

In the midst of their discussion Zindrome returned and stood waiting to be recognized.

"What is it, Zindrome? Did you forget something?"

"No, great Lords. When I returned to the world from which I obtained the samples I discovered that the race had progressed to the point where it developed fission processes, engaged in an atomic war and annihilated itself."

"That was extremely inconsiderate — typical, however, I should say, of warm-blooded instability."

Zindrome continued to shift.

"Have you something else to report?"

"Yes, great Masters. The two specimens I released have multiplied and are now spread over the entire planet of Glan.

"We should have been advised!"

"Yes, great Lords, but I was absent and —"

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"They themselves should have reported this action!"

"Masters, I am afraid they are unaware of your existence."

How could that have happened?" asked Dran.

"We are presently buried beneath several thousand layers of alluvial rock. The geological shifts —"

"You have your orders to maintain the palace and clean the grounds," glowered Dran. "Have you been frittering away your time again?"

"No, great Lords! It all occurred during my absence. I shall attend to it immediately."

"First," ordered Drax, "tell us what else our subjects have been up to, that they saw fit to conceal from us."

"Recently," observed the robot, "they have discovered how to forge and temper metals. Upon landing, I observed that they had developed many ingenious instruments of a cutting variety. Unfortunately they were using them to cut one another."

"Do you mean," roared Dran, "that there is strife in the kingdom?"

"Uh, yes, my Lord."

"I will not brook unauthorized violence among my subjects!"

"*Our* subjects," added Drax, with a meaningful glare.

"*Our* subjects," amended Dran. "We must take immediate action."

"Agreed."

"Agreed."

"I shall issue orders forbidding their engagement in activities leading to bloodshed."

"I presume that you mean a joint proclamation," stated Drax.

"Of course. I was not slighting you, I was simply shaken by the civil emergency. We shall draft an official proclamation. Let Zindrome fetch us writing instruments."

"Zindrome, fetch—"

"I have them here, my Lords."

"Now, let me see. How shall we phrase it . . .?"

"Perhaps I should clean the palace while your Excellencies —"

"No! Wait right here! This will be very brief and to the point."

"Mm. 'We hereby proclaim . . .' "

"Don't forget our titles."

"True. 'We, the imperial monarchs of Glan, herebeneath undersigned, do hereby . . .' "

A feeble pulse of gamma rays passed unnoticed by the two rulers. The faithful Zindrome diagnosed its nature, however, and tried unsuccessfully to obtain his monarchs' attention. Finally, he dismissed the project with a stoical gesture typical of his kind. He waited.

"There!" they agreed flourishing the document. "Now you can tell us what you have been trying to say, Zindrome. But make it brief, you must deliver this soon."

"It is already too late, great Lords. This race, also, progressed into civilized states, developed nuclear energy and eradicated itself while you were writing."

"Barbarous!"

"Warm-blooded irresponsibility!"

"May I go clean up now, great Masters?"

"Soon, Zindrome, soon. First, though, I move that we file the proclamation in the Archives for fu-

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ture use, in the event of similar occurrences."

Dran nodded.

"I agree. *We* so order."

The robot accepted the crumbling proclamation and vanished from sight.

"You know," Drax mused, "there must be lots of radioactive material lying about now . . ."

"There probably is."

"It could be used to fuel a ship for another expedition."

"Perhaps."

"This time we could instruct Zindrome to bring back something with a longer lifespan and more deliberate habits — somewhat nearer our own."

"That would have its dangers. But perhaps we could junk the Mono-Robot Protection Pact and order Zindrome to manufacture extras of himself. Under strict supervision."

"That would have its dangers too."

"At any rate, I should have to ponder your suggestion carefully."

"And I yours."

"It's been a busy day," nodded Dran. "Let's sleep on it."

"A good idea."

Sounds of saurian snoring emerged from the great Throne Hall of Glan. END

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WHEN YOU GIFFLE...

BY L. J. STECHER, JR.

They were like any other boys sporting in their old swimming hole—in the depths of space!

I was a little bit worried when I saw Captain Hannah again. I thought he might have decided he wanted his elephants back, and I'd grown sort of attached to them. Although I couldn't break the baby of the habit of nibbling on Gasha leaves, in spite of the fact that they're not good for him.

A few months earlier, Captain Hannah had conned me into taking the elephants off his hands and out of his tramp spaceship. He had suffered from intellectual terrestrial zoological insufficiency — or in other words, he hadn't known whales are mammals, and had delivered the multi-ton Beulah instead, to the Prinkip of Penguin, as an adult sample of Earth's largest mammal.

The Prinkip had quite properly refused delivery, and Hannah had stuck me with her and her incipient progeny.

I needn't have worried. Captain Hannah didn't want her back. He just wanted to relax and talk to someone. I bought him a drink, but I refused one myself, remembering what had happened to me the times before, when I had listened to Cap-

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tain Hannah with a glass in my hand.

Captain Hannah ran a leathery hand over his leathery face. He looked haggard. "I came here because I've got to talk to somebody," he said, "and you make a good listener.

"Do you remember after I completed my contract with you for the delivery of the gasha root, and after you had talked me into leaving Beulah with you for the sake of the little one, how we had a few drinks together to celebrate our mutual success, before I headed out?"

Well, my memory about who had talked whom into what about Beulah didn't agree with his, but I told him I remembered our last get-together, and he went on.

"Anyone who tries to set up an interstellar Jump with a hangover should be permanently barred from the spaceways," he said with some feeling. "I guess that the only reason they aren't, is that the ones who make a mistake are never heard from again." He paused and sipped. "Except me.

"When I left you that last time, and pushed *Delta Crucis* up into parking orbit, I was full of rhial and a grim determination to deliver a whale to the Prinkip. I must have made some mistake or other in setting up the Jump coordinates, because when I popped out of Limbo, alarm bells went off in all directions. The main computer told me it didn't have the faintest idea where we had arrived, and the auxiliary computer agreed noisily. I turned off the alarms and uncovered the viewports to check for myself, without much hope.

"The view from the ones on the starboard side didn't show me anything I recognized, so I pushed myself across the room and slid off the covers on the port side.

"The stars there were unfamiliar, too, but I'm afraid that I didn't notice for awhile. The foreground was taking up all of my attention. There were two towheaded kids — about eight or nine years old, I should judge — floating in empty space, with their noses flattened against the viewport glass. They were as brown as berries, and as naked as jaybirds, and as cute as chipmunks, and as alike as two peas, and as improbable as virtue.

"The one on the left — my left, that is — backed off enough so that his nose straightened out, smiled angelically and asked politely whether he and his twin brother might come in. That is, his lips moved and I heard the words, and they made sense. Only they didn't. Nothing made sense when somebody talking in a vacuum could be heard as if he were right beside you. Anyway, I nodded that they could come in.

"The two boys swam forward, using a sort of self-taught kind of a breast stroke, right through the solid glass of the viewport, until they were in the ship beside me, and then they stood up. That's no small feat in itself, standing up in a spaceship in the absence of gravity or spin."

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Captain Hannah beckoned the waiter for a refill, and then asked me if I wouldn't change my mind and drink with him. The way this story of his was going, I figured I might as well, and he didn't start in talking again until we had both had a sip.

"They were skinny, and they looked explosively energetic, the way kids that age usually do. But they just stood quietly facing me side by side, giving out with cheerful gaptoothed small-boy smiles. Somehow or other it was reassuring to notice that they both had belly buttons. It was an indication to me — whether it made sense or not — that they were just human beings; that they had been born of women in the usual way — and that there must be some rational explanation for what looked like miracles.

" 'Is there anything I can do for you two kids?' I asked, as politely as I knew how.

" 'Well, sir,' said the one who had spoken before, 'please excuse us for barging in on you like this, with no clothes on and all. . .'

"The other boy picked up the conversation without a break, 'but you have materialized your spaceship right in the middle of our swimming hole. . .'

" '. . . and it's muddying everything up something fierce,' finished boy number one.

"I glanced out through the view ports at the illimitable and untrammeled reaches of space, and then back at the boys.

" 'We're afraid you'll just have to take our word for it, sir. This is our swimming hole,' said boy number one earnestly. 'There aren't many. . .'

" '. . . spots like this in space,' number two picked up. 'It has something to do with gravity balances and radiation zones and thought-energy sumps and a lot of other. . .'

" '. . . things like that that we don't understand either because we haven't had it in school yet. But we do know that it's the best place we can reach for space swimming, only. . .'

" '. . . it's too far for us to get to and pull along our clothes too. Besides which, what boy would want to go swimming with his clothes on anyway?' They both came to a full stop.

" 'The only thing wrong with it,' the speaker had shifted again, 'is, it's even too far to bring along any sandwiches and cookies and stuff.'

"I stopped swinging my head back and forth from one to the other as the speaker shifted, and shook myself awake. 'How about some chocolate cake and a bulb or two of milk? I've got plenty of both,' I told them."

"Oh, come now," I said to Captain Hannah, glancing at the row of rhial beakers in front of him. In spite of his space tan, I could see him blush.

"Well, I like chocolate cake," he said defensively. "And drinking milk when I'm in space gets my stomach back in shape for going ashore again with the likes of you. What's

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wrong with that, I'd like to know?"

I signified "Nothing at all," with an elaborate gesture, and he went back to his story after dipping his nose.

"Well, I gave each of them some cake and milk, and they sat down politely at my table to eat it ... and the plates stayed on the table and the cake stayed on the plates even though there wasn't any gravity and I didn't have any spin on the ship.

"'Now what's all this about my muddying up your swimming hole?' I asked, when they had finished eating all my cake and drinking three bulbs of milk each.

"'That's all there is to it, sir,' said the first boy. 'You have changed the gravity balance and the radiation pattern and everything else, . . .'

"'. . . and that's taken all the fun out of swimming. And when you have taken all the chances we have in playing hooky just because this is such a good place to swim, . . .'

"'. . . it's a shame to have it all spoiled. So would you please leave, sir?'

"'Oh, I'd be glad to Jump out of here, boys,' I told them. 'But you see, I've got a little problem. I'm lost. I don't have the faintest idea where in the Universe I am, so how can I set the right coordinates to Jump somewhere else?'

"'Oh!' said the two boys together. 'We didn't realize. . .' They stopped, and looked at each other. They acted as if they were carrying on an argument although their lips didn't move and I couldn't hear anything. At any rate, they soon reached some sort of agreement.

"'We'll have to get help,' said the first boy at last. 'We'd call Dad, except he'd warm both of us real good if he knew we were out here swimming when we're supposed to be in school. But. . .'

"'There's our big brother Jim. We've got enough on him so maybe he won't squeal. And he's grown up enough to know what to do.'

"'And he was real good at narking and giffling in school.'

"'He got an A in narking, and a B plus in giffling, but of course it wasn't *advanced* giffling.'

"'Still, he should be able to do the job, all right.'

"Their faces went blank and they both stared off into space as if they were concentrating as hard as they could. Suddenly, with no warning and no noise, a young man of about fifteen or so was standing beside them with his hands on his hips. He wore a kilt and a singlet of some soft, shiny material, but no shoes.

"'Well, if it isn't Mike and Aloysius,' he said conversationally. 'Boy, are you two going to get it when you show your faces around home. Dad's been looking for you.'

"'The older boy turned and stuck his hand out at me. 'Captain Hannah, sir,' he said. 'My name's Jim Monahan. I must apologize for the brats. They bother everybody. They have asked me to help get you out of your difficulties.'

"'I must have set the wrong Jump pattern,' I stammered. 'It's

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incredibly lucky that I came back out of Limbo in a place where I could ask for help. If you can give it to me, I would be most grateful.'

" 'Well, sir,' said Jim, 'your appearing here isn't quite as incredible as you might think. Dad says that several of you Bumblejumpers...' He stopped and looked embarrassed. 'I'm sorry, sir. Several of you who have made errors in your Jump setting have ended up here.'

" 'Not in our swimming hole,' asserted Aloysius.

" 'In this general area of space. Dad calls it the delta of a psionic river. He says that we who are psionic adepts should stop bouncing back and forth between here and the established sectors so much, or we'll groove the psionic channels so much that everybody who goofs will end up here. And we may even increase the probability of goofing.'

" 'I just want to get back to where I can recognize the stars,' I told the boy.

" 'If you don't mind my saying so, sir, I nark the impression that you want something more. Something about getting a whale to the planet Penguin II?'

"I nodded. 'If these kid brothers of yours can run around mald-bottom in space without catching cold, then I guess you can probably send a whale from one planet to another by mind power — by psionics.'

" 'But that's not really what you want?' the boy persisted.

"I nodded. 'Even psionics can't do what I really want. A *Delta* class freighter can do almost anything, but it can't transport an adult blue whale across space. Still, that's what I really want it to do, and it's that desire that you are apparently picking out of my mind.'

"Jim frowned for a couple of minutes in deep concentration while Mike and Aloysius nudged each other slyly, gradually got more rambunctious, and finally lost their tempers and started a half-wrestling, half-boxing tussle.

"Jim clapped his hands together sharply, twice. The kids quieted down abruptly, looking at Jim indignantly and rubbing their posteriors. At the same time, Jim picked a small box out of the air and handed it to me with a flamboyant gesture.

"Lettered on the box was the neatly printed instruction 'EAT ME'.

" 'Shades of Lewis Carroll,' I said to myself, opening the box and looking at the little cakes inside.

" 'Go ahead, sir,' chorused Mike and Aloysius, 'Don't be chicken!'

"I looked at the pill-sized cakes for a minute. Then I shrugged my shoulders and tossed them all down at once, like taking a shot of whiskey neat. For a few seconds nothing happened except for an odd sort of fizzling feeling inside, and then suddenly I started to shrink, just like Alice in Wonderland. I hardly had time to notice that the whole Monahan tribe was shrinking right along with me, before I found that I was having trouble breathing, and it was as if my insides were trying to climb up past my Adam's

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apple. I couldn't talk, so I tried hard to give Jim Monahan a dirty look before I passed out, which I promptly did.

"I couldn't have been unconscious for more than a few seconds I woke up to find that I had shrunk to a height of maybe two feet, and that Jim was looking at me with a very worried expression.

" 'Boy, was that a lousy job of giffling,' I heard Aloysius say, irreverently. At least, it was Aloysius unless the two boys had exchanged positions while I had been out.

" 'Yup, you've got to be careful when you giffle,' agreed his twin sagely.

" 'What happened?' I asked weakly. 'And why have you shrunk us down this way?'

" 'Shrunk us down?' asked Jim blankly, and then he laughed. 'Oh, I didn't do anything like that to us. That sort of thing is too dangerous to try unless you're a Master Giffler. I don't think even Dad would try a thing like that with a human being. All I did was to enlarge the spaceship. At the same time, of course, I increased the strength of the intermolecular bonds, so that the ship is just as sturdy as it was before. Only now it's big enough to carry a whale.'

" 'Only the big jerk forgot that with the space in this room suddenly increased to twenty-five or thirty times as big as it was before, there still wasn't any more...'

" '... air in it, so you nearly suffocated.' I think it ended with Mike.

" 'But he finally had sense enough to gather the air in a ball around your head, so you woke up all right, and I nark that now he had brought in enough air...'

" '... to fill the room and all your tanks, so you'll be all right now.'

" 'And now you can get yourself out of our swimming hole, sir,' Aloysius, I think, concluded.

"I was still a little dazed. But I tried to put my brain in gear, while I looked from one smiling, expectant Monahan face to another. 'I've got one question,' I said at last.

" 'Yes, sir?' asked Jim, all eagerness to be helpful.

" 'Does this psionic ability all of you are playing around with so freely make you basically any smarter than an ordinary untalented run-of-the-mill human of the same age?'

" 'Well of course, sir,' said Jim, and then looked at the two brats, who were staring at him with their mouths open.

" 'Well, of course, we have a lot more to learn than the Normals,' he began again. 'But then, I've studied hard instead of playing hooky like the imps here.'

"Now all three of us were staring at him.

"'Well, to be truthful, sir, Dad says that we've got about the same basic intelligence as the Normals, and that we shouldn't try to get uppity because of our special talents. But most Normals that I've seen usually don't act very bright.'

" 'Then,' I asked with elaborate patience, 'all you did was to make

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my *Delta Crucis* bigger, and to increase the strength of the components to match? Nothing else?'

"Jim nodded warily. 'That's it, sir.'

"It didn't occur to you, son, that while that might be all right for the hull and the Jumping equipment, you just don't change the size of a rocket motor to change its power rating? Don't you realize that if I turned on my landing rockets right now, I'd probably blow us all to Kingdom Come?'

"Jim thought for a minute. 'I nark it now, sir,' he said slowly. 'And the hull probably isn't right too, I'm afraid.'

" 'You're probably right, son,' I answered him. 'Don't you think you had just better put things right back the way they were before?'

"I added hastily, 'Not forgetting to get rid of the extra air you giffled in.'

" 'No, sir. I can't do that! The boy's forehead was all wrinkled with his effort at thinking. 'Dad says that when you start in to giffling, you've got to carry through what you start.'

" 'But it's my life you're giffling around with,' I protested. 'You don't have to worry. *You* can stay alive in the vacuum of space, or jump around without a ship, but I can't. Just leave me alone, why don't you? Just show me the way to go home and then leave me alone, like a good boy.'

"Jim shook his head. 'I'm just going to have to get help, sir,' he said.

"Mike and Aloysius both looked scared. 'Jim, why don't you just do like Captain Hannah says,' asked one of them.

" 'If you get Dad into this,' said the other, 'he'll for sure give it to the two of us, but good. And we'll just bet that he won't think you're too old to get it, either.'

"Jim waved the argument aside. 'He'll probably be right, too,' he commented absently, acting as if he were listening to something the rest of us couldn't hear. Then he nodded decisively.

" 'Your *Delta Crucis* is all fixed up right, now, sir,' he told me in positive tones. 'There's even a tank for you to keep the whale in. But I suggest you not waste any time in getting the beast to Penguin, because the ship won't stay this way too long. Then it'll revert to the way it used to be before you ran into us.'

"He noticed my expression of concentrated unhappiness.

" 'Oh, not while you are carrying the blue whale,' he assured me. 'As soon as you finish the job, or in a couple of months if you don't get started on it. There is nothing to be worried about, sir.'

"Then he heaved a kind of deep, shuddering sigh, and said, 'We have got to go now. Good luck to you.'

" 'The same to you,' I said automatically. The two brats gave me a withering look of scorn, apparently for expressing such impossible sentiments, and then all three Monahans disappeared."

Captain Hannah took another whiff of rhial and then stared at the beaker broodingly.

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"Well," I asked. "Did you get the whale to Penguin? And was the Prinkip pleased? Or did you just sit around and drink rhial until your ship popped back to its normal size?"

"Oh, I couldn't pass up a chance like that," he said. "I delivered the whale all right. She turned out to be gravid, too. I seem to make a habit out of picking up pregnant cargoes. The Prinkip was very pleased, and gave me a bonus.

"Then *Delta Crucis* went back to being herself again. And I found this note, along with a small gift, in the Control room." He fished a sheet of paper out of the breast bocket of his blue uniform coat and passed it across the table to me.

It was an unsigned letter written in a beautiful flowing script. It said:

My dear Captain Hannah:

Congratulations to you on the success of your venture. All seems to have worked out well for you.

For three Monahans, things were less pleasant. For a considerable period of time they experienced difficulty in sitting down in comfort.

You are welcome at any time to pay a return visit to our remote sector of space and reestablish your acquaintance with the Adepts.

It is not beyond the bounds of possibilities that Normals can be taught to demonstrate our Psionic abilities.

Until you return then,

Farewell!

The note was unsigned.

"Well," I said, "You are going to take them up on it, aren't you? This is a chance in a lifetime. In a hundred lifetimes — it's a chance in a million years. What are you waiting for, man?"

Captain Hannah shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "But does that note sound as it it had been written by a mature Adept — by, say, the father of those boys?

"Doesn't it seem more like something written by a teenage boy? Or even by a precocious nine-year-old?"

"Well, what of it?" I asked. "Provided that it gets you back there, so that you will have the chance of talking with the father?"

"I'm afraid that one or more of the Monahan children may hold a grudge against me. After all, I apparently did cause the whole tribe of them considerable humiliation and pain, in the end. If they want to get even, they have a lot of power — whatever narking and giffling may be. So here's a present for you, and I advise you to throw it away, even if I can't bring myself to do so."

Captain Hannah slammed something down on the table, jammed his head, and stalked out of the bar.

I picked up his gift and examined it. It was a small bottle. On the tag attached to it, neatly and mockingly printed, were the words, "DRINK ME."

I stared at it for a long time, thinking of opportunity — and of snarks and of boojums. END

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ALL WE MARSMEN

BY PHILIP K. DICK

ILLUSTRATED BY FINLAY

CONCLUSION

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It was an alien world they owned—but never so alien as the world they saw through a strange child's eyes!

What Has Gone Before . . .

To the boy Manfred Steiner the threshold of time was only a door to another room. It hung ajar. He could see through it, he could even step through it; he could mold the past and future in patterns that his racked brain produced. For the boy was insane.

It was the dream of Arnie Kott, the most powerful man on the planet Mars, to use this boy and his uncanny control of time to further enrich himself. Yet Arnie Kott was himself distorted by the boy's terrifying powers. Kott and all the people around him—Jack Bohlen, his handyman; Doreen Anderton, the beautiful, amoral girl who was queen of Kott's empire; even the settlers and visitors from Earth—found their lives reshaped by the pervasive influence that spread from the twisted mind of the boy.

Jack Bohlen, made to relive one hour of his life half a dozen times as the boy sought to fit together his time-vision of the world into a pattern his mind could tolerate, escaped into the humdrum necessities of a simple repair job. The Public School, robot-run and robot-manned, had suffered a small mechanical breakdown. For Bohlen it gave him a hope of sanity, since the world of mechanics and electronics at least was still stable. He felt almost secure again, as he completed his repairs to the robot teacher which had gone astray . . .

Until it began to malfunction in a way he could not repair. Gubble, it said, the nonsense word the insane boy had used to describe the hopeless clash of patterns in time which had tortured his percipient mind. Gubble . . . it was all gubble, thought Jack Bohlen; now even the machines were caught in the web of destruction that was spreading across the planet!

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PART III

XIX

Still at his desk in his office at Camp B-G, brooding over the behavior of Anne Esterhazy, Doctor Glaub received an emergency call. It was from the Master Circuit of the UN's Public School.

"Doctor," its flat voice declared, "I am sorry to disturb you but we require assistance. There is a male citizen wandering about our premises in an evident state of mental confusion. We would like you to come and cart him off."

"Certainly," Doctor Glaub murmured. "I'll come straight there."

Soon he was in the air, piloting his 'copter across the desert from New Israel toward the Public School.

When he arrived the Master Circuit met him and escorted him at a brisk pace through the building until they reached a closed-off corridor. "We felt we should keep the children away from him," the Master Circuit explained as she caused the wall to roll back, exposing the corridor.

There, with a dazed expression on his face, stood a man familiar to Doctor Glaub. The doctor had an immediate reaction of satisfaction, in spite of himself. So Jack Bohlen's schizophrenia had caught up with him.

Bohlen's eyes were without focus. Obviously he was in a state of catatonic stupor, probably alternating with excitement. He looked exhausted. And with him was another person whom Doctor Glaub recognized. Manfred Steiner sat curled up on the floor, bent forward, likewise in an advanced state of withdrawal.

Your association did not cause either of you to prosper, Doctor Glaub observed to himself.

With the help of the Master Circuit he got both Bohlen and the Steiner boy into his 'copter, and was flying back to New Israel and Camp B-G.

Hunched over, his hands clenched, Bohlen said, "Let me tell you what happened."

"Please do," Doctor Glaub said, feeling — at last — in control.

Jack Bohlen in an uneven voice said, "I went to the School to pick up my son. I took Manfred." He twisted then in his seat to look at the Steiner boy, who had not come out of his catalepsy. The boy lay rolled up on the floor of the 'copter, as inert as a carving. "Manfred got away from me. And then communication between me and the School broke down. All I could hear was —" He broke off.

"Folle a deux," Glaub murmured. Madness of two.

Bohlen said, "Instead of the School I heard him. I heard his words coming from the Teachers." He was silent then.

"Manfred has a powerful personality," Doctor Glaub said. "It is a drain on one's resources to be around for long. I think it would be well for you, for your own health, to abandon this project. I think you risk too much."

"I have to see Arnie tonight," Bohlen said in a ragged, harsh whisper.

"What about yourself?"

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Bohlen said nothing.

"I can treat you," Doctor Glaub said, "at this stage of your difficulty. Later on — I'm not so sure."

"In there, in that damn School," Bohlen said, "I got completely confused. I didn't know what to do. I kept going on, looking for someone who I could still talk to. Who wasn't like — him." He gestured toward the boy.

"It is a massive problem for the schizophrenic to relate to the School," Glaub said. "The schizophrenic, such as yourself, very often deals with people through their unconscious. The Teaching Machines, of course, have no shadow personalities. What they are is all on the surface. Since the schizophrenic is accustomed constantly to ignore the surface and look beneath — he draws a blank. He is simply unable to understand them."

Bohlen said, "I couldn't understand anything they said. It was all just that meaningless talk Manfred uses. That private language."

"You're fortunate you could come out of it," Doctor Glaub said.

"I know."

"So now what for you, Bohlen? Rest and recovery? Or more of this dangerous contact with a child so unstable that —"

"I have no choice," Jack Bohlen said.

"That's right, you have no choice. You must withdraw."

Bohlen said, "But I learned something. I learned how great the stakes are for me personally, in all this. Now I know what it would be like to be cut off from the world, isolated the way Manfred is. I'd do anything to avoid that. I have no intention of giving up now." With shaking hands he got a cigarette from his pocket and lit up.

"The prognosis for you is not good," Doctor Glaub said.

Jack Bohlen nodded.

"There's been a remission of your difficulty, due no doubt to your being removed from the environment of the School. Shall I be blunt? There's no telling how long you'll be able to function. Perhaps another ten minutes. Another hour. Possibly until tonight, and then you may well find yourself enduring a worse collapse. The nocturnal hours are especially bad, are they not?"

"Yes," Bohlen said.

"I can do two things for you. I can take Manfred back to Camp B-G and I can represent you at Arnie's tonight, be there as your official psychiatrist. I do that all the time. It's my business. Give me a retainer and I'll drop you off at your home."

"Maybe after tonight," Bohlen said. "Maybe you can represent me later on, if this gets worse. But tonight I'm taking Manfred with me to see Arnie Kott."

Doctor Glaub shrugged. Impervious to suggestion, he realized. A sign of autism. Jack Bohlen could not be persuaded. He was too cut-off already to hear and understand. Language for him had become a hollow ritual, signifying nothing.

"My boy David," Bohlen said all at once. "I have to go back there to the School and pick him up. And

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my Yee Company 'copter's there, too." His eyes had become clearer, now, as if he were emerging from his state.

"Don't go back there," Doctor Glaub urged.

"Take me back."

"Then don't go down into the School. Stay up on the field. I'll have them send up your son — you can sit in your 'copter until he's up. That would be safe for you, perhaps. I'll deal with the Master Circuit for you." Doctor Glaub felt a rush of sympathy for this man, for his dogged instincts to go on in his own manner.

"Thanks," Bohlen said. "I'd appreciate that." He shot a smile at the doctor, and Glaub smiled back.

Arnie Kott said plaintively. "Where's Jack Bohlen?" It was six o'clock in the evening, and Arnie sat by himself in his living room, drinking a slightly too-sweet Old Fashioned which Helio had fixed.

At this moment his tame Bleekman was in the kitchen preparing a dinner entirely of black-market goodies, all from Arnie's new stocks. Reflecting that he now obtained his spread at wholesale prices, Arnie felt good. What an improvement on the old system, where Norbert Steiner made all the profit! Arnie sipped his drink and waited for his guests to arrive. In the corner, music emerged from the speakers, subtle and yet pervasive.

He was still in that trance-like frame of mind when the noise of the telephone startled him awake.

"Arnie, this is Scott."

"Oh?" Arnie said, not pleased. He preferred to deal through his cunning code system. "Look, I've got a vital business meeting tonight here. Unless you've got something —"

"This is important, all right," Scott said. "There's somebody else hoeing away at our row."

Puzzled, Arnie said, "What?" And then he understood what Scott Temple meant. "You mean the goodies?"

"Yes," Scott said. "And he's all set up. He's got his field, his incoming rockets, his route. He must have taken over Stein—"

"Don't talk any further," Arnie interrupted. "Come on over here right away."

"Will do." The phone clicked as Scott rang off.

How do you like that, Arnie said to himself. Just as I'm getting good and started, some clown horns in. And I mean, I didn't even want to get into this black market business in the first place. Why didn't this guy tell me he wanted to take over where Steiner left off? But it's too late now. I'm in it, and nobody's going to force me out.

Half an hour later Scott appeared at the door, agitated. He paced about Arnie Kott's living room, eating hors d'oeuvres and talking away at a great rate. "He's a real pro, this guy. Must have been in the business before, sometime. He's already gone all over Mars, to practically everybody, including isolated houses way out in the damn fringes, to those housewives out there who buy maybe one jar or bottle. So he's leaving no stone unturned. There won't be

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any room for us, and we're just barely beginning to get our operation moving. This guy, let's face it, is running rings around us."

"I see," Arnie said, rubbing the bald part of his scalp.

"We've got to do something, Arnie."

"Do you know where his base of operations is?"

"No, but it's probably in the F.D.R. Mountains. That's where Norb Steiner had his field. We'll look there first." On his memo pad, Scott made a note of that.

"Find his field," Arnie said, "And let me know. And I'll hav a Lewistown police ship out there."

"Then he'll know who's against him."

"That's correct. I want him to know it's Arnie Kott he's got to contend with and not no ordinary opposition. I'll have the police ship drop a tactical A-bomb or some other minor demolition type of weapon, and put an end to his field. So he'll see we're genuinely sore at him for his effrontery. And that's what it is, him coming in and competing against me, when I didn't even want to get into this business! It's bad enough without him making it harder."

On his memo pad, Scott made notes of all that: . . . *him coming and competing against me . . . him making it even harder, etc.*

"You get me the location," Arnie concluded, "and I'll see that he's taken care of. I won't have the police get him, just his equipment. We don't want to find ourselves in trouble with the UN. I'm sure this'll blow over right away. Just one guy, do you think? It's not for instance a big outfit from Home."

"The story I get is it's definitely one guy."

"Fine," Arnie said, and sent Scott off. The door shut after him and once more Arnie Kott was alone in his living room, while his tame Bleekman puttered in the kitchen.

"How's the bouillabaisse coming?" Arnie called into him.

"Fine, Mister," Heliogabalus said. "May I inquire who is to come this evening to eat all this?" At the stove he toiled surrounded by several kinds of fish, plus many herbs and spices.

Arnie said, "It'll be Jack Bohlen, Doreen Anderton and some autistic child Jack's working with that Doctor Glaub recommended. . .Norb Steiner's son."

"Low types all," Heligabalus murmured.

Well, same to you, Arnie thought. "Just fix the food right," he said with irritation. He shut the kitchen door and returned to the living room. You creep, you got me into this, he thought to himself. It was you and your prognosticating stone that gave me the idea. And it better have worked out, because I got everything riding on it. And in addition —

The doorchimes sounded through the music from the speakers.

Opening the front door, Arnie found himself facing Doreen. She smiled warmly at him, entering the living room on high heels, a fur around her shoulders. "Hi. What smells so good?"

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"Some darn fish thing." Arnie took her wrap. It left her shoulders smooth, tanned, faintly freckled, bare. "No," he said at once, "this isn't that kind of evening. This is business. You go in and put on a decent blouse." He steered her to the bedroom.

As he stood in the bedroom doorway he thought, What a terrific high-type looking woman I got, here. As she carefully laid her strapless gown out on the bed he thought, I gave her that. He recalled the model at the department store appearing wearing it. But Doreen looked a lot better. She had all that flaming red hair that plunged down the back of her neck like a drizzle of fire.

"Arnie," she said, turning to face him as she buttoned her blouse, "you go easy on Jack Bohlen tonight."

"Aw hell," he protested. "whadya mean? All I want from good old Jack is results. I mean, he's had long enough — time's run out!"

Doreen repeated, "Go easy, Arnie. Or I'll never forgive you."

Grumbling, he walked away, to the sideboard in the living room, and began fixing her a drink. "What'll you have? I got a bottle of this ten-year-old Irish whiskey. It's okay."

"I'll have that, then," Doreen said, emerging from the bedroom. She seated herself on the couch and smoothed her skirt over her crossed knees.

"You look good in anything," Arnie said.

"Thank you."

"Listen, what you're doing with Bohlen has my sanction of course, as you know. But it's all on the surface, what you're doing. Right? Deep inside you're saving yourself for me."

Quizzically, Doreen eyed him until he laughed. "Watch it," she said. "Yes, of course I'm yours, Arnie. Everything here in Lewistown is yours, even the bricks and straw. Every time I pour a little water down the kitchen drain I think of you."

"Why me?"

"Because you're the totem god of wasted water." She smiled at him. "It's a little joke, that's all. I was thinking about your steam bath with all its run-off."

"Yeah," Arnie said. "Remember that time you and I went there late at night and I unlocked it with my key, and we went in, like a couple of bad kids. . .we sneaked in, turned on the hot water showers until the whole place was nothing but steam."

"Very primordial," Doreen said, recalling.

"I felt like I was nineteen again that night," Arnie said. "I really am young, for an old guy. I mean, I got a lot left to me." He paced about the room. "When is that Bohlen going to get here?"

The telephone rang.

"Mister," Heliogabalus called from the kitchen, "I am unable to attend to that."

To Doreen, Arnie said, "If it's Bohlen calling to say he can't make it —" He made a dour throat-cutting motion and picked up the receiver.

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"Arnie," a man's voice came. "Sorry to bother you. This is Doctor Glaub."

Relieved, Arnie said, "Ho, Doc Glaub." To Doreen he said, "It's not Bohlen."

Doctor Glaub said, "Arnie, I know you're expecting Jack Bohlen tonight. He's not there yet, is he?"

"Naw."

Hesitating, Glaub said, "Arnie, I happen to have spent some time with Jack today, and although—"

"What's the matter? Has he had a schizophrenic seizure?" With acute intuition, Arnie knew it was so; that was the point of the doctor's call. "Okay," Arnie said, "He's under a strain, under the pressure of time; granted. But so are we all. I gotta disappoint you if you want me to excuse him like some kid who's too sick to go to school. I can't do that. Bohlen knew what he was getting into. If he doesn't have any results to show me tonight, I'll fix him so he never repairs another toaster on Mars the rest of his life."

Doctor Glaub was silent and then he said, "It's people like you with your harsh driving demands that create schizophrenics."

"So what? I've got standards, he's got to meet them; that's all. Very high standards, I know that."

"So does he have high standards."

Arnie said, "Not as high as mine. Well, you got anything else to say, Doc Glaub?"

"No," Glaub said. "Except that—" His voice shook. "Nothing else. Thanks for your time."

"Thanks for calling." Arnie hung up. "That gutless wonder! He's too cowardly to say what he was thinking." Disgustedly, he walked away from the phone. "Afraid to stick up for what he believes in. I got nothing but contempt for him. Why'd he call if he's got no guts?"

Doreen said, "I'm amazed he called. Sticking his neck out. What did he say about Jack?" Her eyes were darkened by concern. She rose and approached Arnie, putting her hand on his arm to stop his pacing. "Tell me."

"Aw, he just said he was with Bohlen today for a while. I suppose Bohlen had some sort of fit. His ailment, you know."

"Is he coming?"

"God, I don't know. Why does everything have to be so complicated? Doctors calling, you pawing at me like a whipped dog or something." With resentment and aversion he loosened her fingers from his arm and pushed her aside. "And that nut in the kitchen. God, is he baking some witchdoctor brew in there? He's been going for hours!"

In a faint but controlled voice Doreen said, "Arnie, listen. If you push Jack too far and injure him, I'll never see you again. I promise."

"Everybody's protecting him! No wonder he's sick."

"He's a good person."

"He better be a good technician, too. He better have that kid's mind spread out like a roadmap for me to read."

They faced each other.

Shaking her head, Doreen turned away. She picked up her drink and moved off, her back to Arnie. "Okay

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I can't tell you what to do. You can pick up a dozen women as good as me. What am I to big Arnie Kott?" Her voice was bleak and envenomed.

He followed after her awkwardly. "Hell, you're unique, Dor. I swear, you're incredible! Like what a swell smooth back you got, that dress you wore here, it showed it." He stroked her neck. "A knockout, even by Home standards."

The doorchimes sounded.

"That's him," Arnie said, moving at once toward the door.

He opened the door and there stood Jack Bohlen, looking tired. With him was a boy who danced unceasingly about on tiptoe, from one side of Jack to the other, his eyes shining, taking in everything and yet not focusing on any one thing. The boy at once slithered past Arnie and into the living room, where Arnie lost sight of him.

Disconcerted, Arnie said to Jack Bohlen, "Enter."

"Thanks, Arnie," Jack said, coming in. Arnie shut the door and the two of them looked around for Manfred.

"He went in the kitchen," Doreen said.

Sure enough, when Arnie opened the kitchen door, there stood the boy, raptly observing Heliogabalus. "What's the matter?" Arnie said to the boy. "You never saw a Bleekman before?"

The boy said nothing.

"What's that dessert you're making, Helio?" Arnie said.

"Flan," Heliogabalus said. "A Philippine dish, a custard with a caramel sauce. From Mrs. Rombauer's cookbook."

"Manfred," Arnie said, "this here is Heliogabalus."

Standing at the kitchen doorway, Doreen and Jack watched, too. The boy seemed deeply affected by the Bleekman, Arnie noticed. As if under a spell he followed with his eyes every move Helio made. With painstaking care, Helio was pouring the flan into molds which he carried to the freezing compartment of the refrigerator.

Almost shyly, Manfred said, "Hello."

"Hey, Arnie said. "He said an actual word."

Helio said in a cross voice, "I must ask all of you to leave the kitchen. Your presence makes me self-conscious so that I cannot work." He glared at them until one by one they left the kitchen. The door, shut from within, swung closed after them, cutting off the sight of Helio at his job.

"He's sort of odd," Arnie apologized. "But he sure can cook."

Jack said to Doreen, "That's the first time I've heard Manfred do that." He seemed impressed. He walked off by himself, ignoring the rest of them, to stand at the window.

Joining him, Arnie said, "What do you want to drink?"

"Bourbon and water."

"I'll fix it," Arnie said. "I can't bother Helio with trivia like this." He laughed, but Jack did not.

The three of them sat with their drinks, for a time. Manfred, given some old magazines to read,

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stretched out on the carpet, once more oblivious to their presence.

"Wait'll you taste this meal," Arnie said.

"Smells wonderful," Doreen said.

"All black market," Arnie said.

Both Doreen and Jack, together on the couch, nodded.

"This is a big night," Arnie said.

Again they nodded.

Raising his drink, Arnie said, "Here's to communication. Without which there wouldn't be a damn nuthin."

Somberly, Jack said, "I'll drink to that, Arnie." However, he had already finished his drink. He gazed at the empty glass, evidently at a loss.

"I'll get you another," Arnie said, taking it from him.

At the sideboard, as he fixed a fresh drink for Jack, he saw that Manfred had grown bored with the magazines. Once more the boy was on his feet, roaming around the room. Maybe he'd like to cut out and paste, Arnie decided. He gave Jack his fresh drink and then went into the kitchen.

"Helio, get some glue and scissors for the kid, and some paper for him to paste onto."

Helio had finished with the flan. His work evidently was done and he had seated himself with a copy of *Life*. With reluctance he got up and went in search of glue, scissors and paper.

"Funny kid, isn't he?" Arnie said to Helio, when the Bleekman returned. "What's your opinion about him, is it the same as mine?"

"Children are all alike," Helio said and went out of the kitchen, leaving Arnie alone.

Arnie followed. "We'll eat pretty soon," he announced. "Everybody had some of these Danish blue cheese hors d'oeuvres? Anybody need anything at all?"

The phone rang. Doreen, who was closest, answered it. She handed it to Arnie. "For you. A man."

It was Doctor Glaub again. "Mr. Kott," Doctor Glaub said in a thin, unnatural voice, "it is essential to my integrity to protect my patients. Two can play at this bullying game. As you know, your out-of-wedlock child Sam Esterhazy is at Camp B-G, where I am in attendance."

Arnie groaned.

"If you do not treat Jack Bohlen fairly," Glaub continued, "if you apply your inhumane, cruel, aggressive, domineering tactics on him, I will retaliate by discharging Sam Esterhazy from Camp B-G on the grounds that he is mentally retarded. Is that comprehended?"

"Oh, God, anything you say," Arnie groaned. "I'll talk to you about it tomorrow. Go to bed or something. Take a pill, go fly a kite, just get off me." He slammed down the phone.

The tape on the tape transport had reached its end. The music, a long time ago, had ceased. Arnie stalked over to his tape library and snatched up a box at random. That doctor, he said to himself. I'll get him, but not now. No time now. There must be something the matter with him.

Examining the box he read:

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W.A. Mozart
Symphony 40 in G mol.
K. 550

"I love Mozart," he said to Doreen, Jack Bohlen and the Steiner boy. "I'll put this on." He removed the reel of tape from the box and put it on the transport. He fiddled with the knobs of the amplifier until he could hear the hiss of the tape as it passed through the head. "Bruno Walter conducting," he told his guests. "A great rarity from the golden age of recordings."

A hideous racket of screeches and shrieks issued from the speakers. Noises like the convulsions of the dead, Arnie thought in horror. He ran to shut off the tape transport.

Seated on the carpet snipping pictures from the magazines with his scissors and pasting them into new configurations, Manfred Steiner heard the noise and glanced up. He saw Mr. Kott hurry to the tape machine to shut it off. How blurred Mr. Kott became, Manfred noticed. It was hard to see him when he moved so swiftly. It was as if in some way he had managed to disappear from the room and then reappear in another spot. The boy felt frightened.

The noise, too, frightened him. He looked to the couch where Mr. Bohlen sat, to see if he were upset. But Mr. Bohlen remained where he was with Doreen Anderton, interlinked with her in a fashion that made the boy cringe with concern. How could two people stand being so close? It was, to Manfred, as if their separate identities had flowed together and the idea that such a muddling could be terrified him. He pretended not to see. He saw past them, at the safe, unblended wall.

The voice of Mr. Kott broke over the boy, harsh and jagged tones that he did not understand. Then Doreen Anderton spoke, and then Jack Bohlen. They were all chattering in a chaos, now, and the boy clapped his hands to his ears. All at once, without warning of any kind, Mr. Kott shot across the room and vanished entirely.

Where had he gone? No matter where he looked the boy could not find him. He began to tremble, wondering what was going to happen. And then he saw, to his bewilderment, that Mr. Kott had reappeared in the room where the food was. He was chattering to the dark figure there.

The dark figure, with rhythmic grace, ebbed from his spot on top of the high stool, flowed step by step across the room and got a glass from the cabinet. Awed by the movement of the man, Manfred looked directly at him, and at that moment the dark man looked back, meeting his gaze.

"You must die," the dark man said to him in a far-off voice. "Then you will be reborn. Do you see, child? There is nothing for you, as you are now, because something went wrong and you cannot see or hear or feel. No one can help you. Do you see, child?"

"Yes," Manfred said.

The dark figure glided to the sink, put powder and water into the glass,

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presented it to Mr. Kott, who drank down the contents, chattering all the while. How beautiful the dark figure was. Why can't I be like that? Manfred thought. No one else looked like that.

His glimpse, his contact with the shadow-like man, was cut off. Doreen Anderton had passed between them as she ran into the kitchen and began talking in high-pitched tones. Once more Manfred put his hands to his ears, but he could not shut out the noise.

He looked ahead, to escape. He got away from the sound and the harsh, blurred comings-and-goings.

Ahead of him a mountain path stretched out. The sky overhead was heavy and red, and then he saw dots' hundreds of gigantic specks that grew and came closer. Things rained down from them, men with unnatural thoughts. The men struck the ground and dashed about in circles. They drew lines, and then great things like slugs landed, one after another, without thoughts of any sort, and began digging.

He saw a hole as large as a world. The earth disappeared and became black, empty and nothing. Into the hole the men jumped one by one, until none of them were left. He was alone, with the silent world-hole.

At the rim of the hole he peeped down. At the bottom, in the nothing, a twisted creature unwound as if released. It snaked up, became wide, contained square space and grew color.

I am in you, Manfred thought. Once again.

A voice said, "He has been here at AM-WEB longer than anyone else. He was here when the rest of us came. He is extremely old."

"Does he like it?"

"Who knows? He can't walk or feed himself. The records were lost in that fire. Possibly he's two hundred years old. They amputated his limbs and of course most of his internal organs were taken out on entry. Mostly he complains about hayfever."

No, Manfred thought. I can't stand it! My nose burns. I can't breathe. Is this the start of life, what the dark shadow-figure promised? A new beginning where I will be different and someone can help me?

Please help me, he said. I need someone, anyone. I can't wait here forever. It must be done soon or not at all. If it is not done I will grow and become the world-hole, and the hole will eat up everything.

The hole, beneath AM-WEB, waited to be all those who walked above, or had ever walked above. It waited to be everyone and everything.

And only Manfred Steiner held it back.

Setting down his empty glass, Jack Bohlen felt the coming-apart of every piece of his body. "We're out of booze," he managed to say to the girl beside him.

To him, Doreen said in a rapid whisper, "Jack, you must remember *you've got friends*. I'm your friend. Doctor Glaub called — he's your friend." She looked into his face anxiously. "Will you be okay?"

"God sake!" Arnie yelled. "I got

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to hear how you've done, Jack. Can't you give me anything?" With envy he faced the two of them. Doreen drew away from Jack imperceptibly. "Are you two just going to sit there necking and whispering? I don't feel good." He left them then, going into the kitchen.

Leaning toward Jack until her lips almost touched his, Doreen whispered, "I love you."

He tried to smile at her. But his face had become stiff. It would not yield. "Thanks," he said, wanting her to know how much it meant to him. He kissed her on the mouth. Her lips were warm, soft with love; they gave what they had to him, holding nothing back.

Her eyes full of tears, she said, "I feel you sliding away farther and farther into yourself again."

"No," he said. "I'm okay." But it was not so; he knew it.

"Gubble gubble," the girl said.

Jack closed his eyes. I can't get away, he thought. It has closed over me completely.

When he opened his eyes he found that Doreen had gotten up from the couch and was going into the kitchen. Voices, hers and Arnie's, drifted to him where he sat.

"Gubble gubble gubble."

"Gubble."

Turning toward the boy who sat snipping at his magazines on the rug, Jack said to him, "Can you hear me? Can you understand me?"

Manfred glanced up and smiled.

"Talk to me," Jack said. "Help me."

There was no response.

Getting to his feet, Jack made his way to the tape recorder; he began inspecting it, his back to the room. Would I be alive now? he asked himself, if I had listened to Doctor Glaub? If I hadn't come here, had let him represent me? Probably not. Like the earlier attack: it would have happened anyhow. It is a process which must unfold. It must work itself out to its conclusion.

The next he knew he was standing on a black, empty sidewalk. The room, the people around him, were gone. He was alone.

Buildings, gray upright surface on both sides. Was this AM-WEB? He looked about frantically. Lights, here and there. He was in a town, and now he recognized it as Lewistown. He began to walk, then.

"Wait," a woman's voice called.

From the entrance of a building a woman in a fur wrap hurried, her high heels striking the pavement and setting up echoes. Jack stopped.

"It didn't go so bad after all," she said, catching up with him, out of breath. "Thank God it's over! You were so tense — I felt it all evening. Arnie is dreadfully upset by the news about the co-op. They're so rich and powerful, they make him so little."

Together, they walked in no particular direction, the girl holding onto his arm.

"And he did say," she said, "that he's going to keep you on as his repairman. I'm positive he means it. But he's sore, though, Jack. All the way through him. I know; I can tell."

He tried to remember, but he could not.

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"Say something," Doreen begged.

After a bit he said, "He — would make a bad enemy."

"I'm afraid that's so." She glanced up into his face. "Shall we go to my place? Or do you want to stop somewhere and get a drink?"

"Let's just walk," Jack Bohlen said

"Do you still love me?"

"Of course," he said.

"Are you afraid of Arnie? He may try to get revenge on you, for — he doesn't understand about your father; he thinks that on some level you must have —" She shook her head. "Jack, he will try to get back at you; he does blame you. He's so damned primitive."

"Yes," Jack said.

"*Say* something," Doreen said. "You're just like wood, like you're not alive. Was it so terrible? It wasn't, was it? You seemed to pull yourself together."

With effort he said, "I'm — not afraid of what he'll do."

"Would you leave your wife for me, Jack? You said you loved me. Maybe we could emigrate back to Earth or something."

Together they wandered on.

XX

For Otto Zitte it was if life had once more opened up. Since Norb Steiner's death he moved about Mars as in the old days, making his deliveries, selling, meeting people face to face and gabbing with them.

And, most particularly, he already had encountered several good-looking women, lonely housewives stranded out in the desert in their homes day after day, yearning for companionship.

So far he had not been able to call back to Mrs. Silvia Bohlen's house. But he knew exactly where it was. He had marked it on his map.

Today he intended to go there.

For the occasion he put on his best suit: a single-breasted sharkskin gray English suit not worn for years, now. The shoes, regrettably, were local, and so was the shirt. But the tie: ah. It had just arrived from New York, the latest in bright, cheerful colors. It divided at the bottom into a wild fork-shape. Holding it up before him he admired it. Then he put it on and admired it there, too.

His long dark hair shone. He felt happy and confident. This day begins it all afresh for me with a woman like Silvia, he said to himself as he put on his wool topcoat, picked up his suitcases, and marched from the storage shed — now made over into a truly comfortable living-quarter — to the 'copter.

In a great soaring arc he lifted the 'copter into the sky and turned it east. The bleak F.D.R. Mountains fell behind him. He passed over the desert, saw at last the George Washington Canal by which he oriented himself. Following it, he approached the smaller canal system which branched from it, and soon he was above the junction of the William Butler Yeats and the Herodotus, near which the Bohlens lived.

Both those women, he ruminated, are attractive, that June Henessy and Silvia Bohlen, but of the two

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of them, Silvia's more to my liking. She has that sleepy, sultry quality that a deeply emotional woman always has. June is too pert and frisky. That kind talks on and on, sort of wise-guy like. I want a woman who's a good listener.

He recalled the trouble he had gotten into before. Wonder what her husband's like, he wondered. Must inquire. A lot of these men take the pioneer life seriously, especially the ones living far out from town; keep guns in their houses and so forth.

However, that was the risk one ran. It was worth it.

Just in case trouble did occur, Otto Zitte had a gun of his own, a small pistol, .22 gauge, which he kept in a hidden side-pocket of one of his suitcases. It was there now, and fully loaded.

Nobody messes around with me, he said to himself. If they want trouble — they'll soon find it.

Cheered by that thought, he dipped his 'copter, scouted out the land below — there was no 'copter parked at the Bohlen house — and prepared to land.

It was innate caution which cause him to park the 'copter over a mile from the Bohlen house, at the entrance of a service canal. From there he hiked on foot, willing to endure the weight of the suitcases; there was no alternative. A number of houses stood between him and the Bohlen place, but he did not pause to knock at them; he went directly along the canal without halting.

When he neared the Bohlen place he slowed, regaining his wind. He eyed the nearby houses carefully... one, right next door, gave off the racket of small girls. People home, there. So he approached the Bohlen place from the opposite side, walking silently and in a line which kept him entirely hidden from the house where the small girls lived.

He arrived, stepped up on the porch, rang the bell.

What is insanity? Jack Bohlen thought. It was, for him, the fact that somewhere he had lost Manfred Steiner and did not remember how or why. He remembered almost nothing of the night before, at Arnie Kott's place. Piece by piece, from what Doreen told him, he had managed to patch together an image of what had taken place. Insanity — to have to construct a picture of oneself, one's life, by making inquiries of others.

But the lapse in memory was a symptom of a deeper disturbance. *It indicated that his psyche had taken an abrupt leap ahead in time.* And this had taken place after a period in which he had lived through several times, on some unconscious level, that very section which was now missing.

He had sat, he realized, in Arnie Kott's living room again and again, experiencing that evening before it arrived; and then, when at last it had taken place in actuality, he had bypassed it. The fundamental disturbance in time-sense, which Doctor Glaub believed was the basis of schizophrenia, was now harassing him.

That evening at Arnie's had taken place for him...but out of sequence.

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In any case, there was no way now that it could be restored. For it now lay in the past. And a disturbance of the sense of past time was not symptomatic of schizophrenia but of compulsive-obsessive neurosis. His problem as a schizophrenic lay entirely with the future.

And his future, as he now saw it, consisted mostly of Arnie Kott and Arnie's instinctive drive for revenge.

What chance do we have against Arnie? he asked himself.

Almost none.

Turning from the window of Doreen's living room, he walked slowly into the bedroom and gazed down at her as she lay, still asleep, in the big bed.

While he stood there looking at her she woke, saw him, smiled up at him. "I was having the strangest dream," she said. "In the dream I was conducting the Bach B Minor Mass, the Kyrie part. It was in four-four time. But when I was right in the middle, someone came along and took away my baton and said it wasn't in four-four time." She frowned. "But it really is. Why should I be conducting that? I don't even like the Bach B Minor Mass. Arnie has a tape of it. He plays it all the time, very late in the evenings."

He thought of the dreams he had been having, of late, vague forms that shifted, flitted away. Something to do with a tall building of many rooms, hawks or vultures circling endlessly overhead. And some dreadful thing in a cupboard . . . he had not seen that, only felt its presence.

"Dreams usually relate to the future," Doreen said. "They deal in the potential in a person. Arnie wants to start a symphony orchestra at Lewistown. He's been talking to Bosley Touvim at New Israel. Maybe I'll be the conductor; maybe that's what my dream means." She slid from the bed, hopped to her feet.

"Doreen," he said steadily, "I don't remember last night. What became of Manfred?"

"He stayed with Arnie. Because he has to go back to Camp B-G, now and Arnie said he'd take him. He goes to New Israel all the time to visit his own boy there, Sam Esterhazy. He's going there today. He told you." After a pause she said, "Jack . . . have you ever had amnesia before?"

"No," he said.

"It's probably due to the shock of quarreling with Arnie. It's awfully hard on a person to tangle with Arnie, I've noticed."

"Maybe that's it," he said.

"What about breakfast? I'll cook bacon and eggs — delicious canned Danish bacon." She hesitated and the she said, "More of Arnie's black market goodies. But they really are good."

"It's fine with me," he said.

"Last night I lay awake for hours wondering what Arnie will do. To us, I mean. I think it'll be your job, Jack. I think he'll put pressure on Mr. Yee to let you go. You must be prepared for that. We both must be. And of course, he'll just dump me; that's obvious. But I don't mind. I have you."

"Yes, that's so; you do have me," he said, as by reflex.

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"The Vengeance of Arnie Kott," Doreen said, as she washed her face in the bathroom. "But he's so human. It's not so scary. I prefer him to that Manfred; I really couldn't stand that child. Last night was a nightmare. I kept feeling awful cold squishy tendrils drifting around the room and in my mind . . . intimations of filth and evil that didn't seem to be either in me or outside of me — just *nearby*. I know where they came from." After a moment she finished, "It was that child. It was his thoughts."

Presently she was frying the bacon and heating coffee. He set the table, and then they sat down to eat. The food smelled good, and he felt much better, tasting it and seeing it and smelling it, and being aware of the girl across from him, with her red hair, long and heavy and sleek, tied back with a gay ribbon.

"Is your son at all like Manfred?" she asked.

"Oh, hell no."

"Does he take after you or —"

"Silvia," he said. "He takes after his mother."

"She's pretty, isn't she?"

"I would say so."

"You know, Jack, last night when I was lying there awake and thinking . . . I thought, maybe Arnie won't turn Manfred over to Camp B-G. What would he do with him, with a creature like that? Arnie's very imaginative. Now this scheme to buy into the F.D.R. land is over . . . maybe he'll find an entirely new use for Manfred's precognition. It occurred to me — you'll laugh. Maybe he'll be able to contact Manfred through Heliogabalus, that tame Bleekman of his." She was quiet, then, eating her breakfast and staring down at the plate.

Jack said, "You could be right." He felt bad, just to hear her say it. It was so plausible.

"You never talked to Helio," Doreen said. "He's the most cynical, bitter person I ever met. He's even sardonic with Arnie. He hates everybody. He's really twisted inside."

"Did I ask Arnie to take the boy? Or was it his idea?"

"Arnie suggested it. At first you wouldn't agree. But you had become so — inert and withdrawn. It was late and we all had drunk a lot. Do you remember that?"

He nodded.

"Arnie serves that Black Label Jack Daniels. I must have drunk a whole fifth of it alone." She shook her head mournfully. "Nobody else on Mars has the liquor Arnie has. I'll miss that."

"There isn't much I can do along that line," Jack said.

"I know. That's okay. I don't expect you to; I don't expect anything, in fact . . . It all happened so fast last night. One minute we were all working together, you and I and Arnie — then, it seemed like all of a sudden, it was obvious that we were on opposite sides, that we'd never be together again, not as friends, anyhow. It's sad." She put up the side of her hand and rubbed at her eyes. A tear slid down her cheek. "I'm crying," she said with anger.

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"If we could go back and relive last night —"

"I wouldn't change it," she said. "I don't regret anything. And you shouldn't either."

"Thanks," he said. He took hold of her hand. "I'll do the best I can by you. As the guy said, I'm not much but I'm all I have."

She smiled, and, after a moment, resumed eating her breakfast.

At the front counter of her shop, Anne Esterhazy wrapped a package for mailing. As she began addressing the label, a man strode into the store. She glanced up and saw him, a tall, thin man wearing glasses much too large for him. Memory brought distaste as she recognized Doctor Glaub.

"Mrs. Esterhazy," Doctor Glaub said, "I want to talk to you, if I may. I regret our altercation. I behaved in a regressive, oral fashion, and I'd like to apologize."

She said, coolly, "What do you want, Doctor? I'm busy."

Lowering his voice he said in a rapid monotone, "Mrs. Esterhazy, this has to do with Arnie Kott and a project he has with an anomalous boy whom he took from the Camp. I want you to use your influence over Mr. Kott and your great zeal for humanitarian causes to see that a severe cruelty is not done to an innocent introverted schizoid individual who was drawn into Mr. Kott's scheme due to his line of work. This man — "

"Wait," she interrupted. "I can't follow." She beckoned him to accompany her to the rear of the store, where no one entering would overhear.

"This man, Jack Bohlen," Doctor Glaub said, even more rapidly than before, "could become permanently psychotic as a result of Kott's desire for revenge, and I ask you, Mrs. Esterhazy —" He pleaded on and on.

Oh, good grief, she thought. Another Cause somebody wants to enlist me in!

But she listened. She had no choice. And it was her nature.

On and on mumbled Doctor Glaub, and gradually she began to build up an idea of the situation which he was trying to describe. It was clear that he held a grudge against Arnie. And yet there was more. Doctor Glaub was a curious mixture of the idealistic and the childishly envious, a queer sort of person, Anne Esterhazy thought as she listened.

"Yes," she said at one point, "that does sound like Arnie."

"I thought of going to the police," Doctor Glaub rambled on. "Or to the UN authorities, and then I thought of you, so I came here." He peered at her with disingenuous hope mixed with determination.

At ten o'clock that morning Arnie Kott entered the front office of the Yee Company at Bunchewood Park. An elongated, intelligent-looking Chinese in his late thirties approached him and asked what he wished.

"I'm Arnie Kott," Arnie said.

"I am Mr. Yee." They shook hands.

"This guy Bohlen that I'm leasing from you."

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"Oh yes. Isn't he a top-drawer repairman? Naturally he is." Mr. Yee regarded him with shrewd caution.

Arnie said, "I like him so much I want to buy his contract from you." He got out his checkbook. "Give me the price."

"Oh, we must keep Mr. Bohlen," Mr. Yee protested, throwing up his hands. "No, sir, we can only lease him, not ever part with him."

"Name me the price." You skinny, smart cookie, Arnie thought.

"To part with Mr. Bohlen — we couldn't replace him!"

Arnie waited.

Considering, Mr. Yee said, "I suppose I could go over our records. But it would take hours to determine Mr. Bohlen's even approximate value."

Arnie waited, checkbook in hand.

After he had purchased Jack Bohlen's work contract from the Yee Company, Arnie Kott flew back home to Lewistown. He found Helio with Manfred, in the living room together. Helio was reading aloud to the boy from a book. "What's all this mumbo-jumbo?" Arnie demanded.

Helio, lowering his book, said, "This child has a speech impediment which I am overcoming."

"Bull," Arnie said, "you'll never overcome it." He took off his coat and held it out to Helio. After a pause the Bleekman reluctantly laid down the book, accepted the coat and moved off to hang it in the hall closet.

From the corner of his eye Manfred seemed to be looking at Arnie. "How you doing, kid?" Arnie said in a friendly voice. He whacked the boy on the back. "Listen, you want to go back to that nuthouse, that no-good Camp B-G? Or do you want to stay with me I'll give you ten minutes to decide."

To himself, Arnie thought, you're staying with me, no matter what you decide. You crazy fruity dumb kid, you and your dancing around on your toes and not talking and not noticing anybody. And your future-reading talent which I know you got down there in that fruity brain of yours, which last night proved there's no doubt of.

Returning, Helio said, "He wants to stay with you, Mister."

"Sure he does," Arnie said pleased.

"His thoughts," Helio said, "are a clear as plastic to me, and mine likewise to him. We are both prisoners, Mister, in a hostile land."

At that Arnie laughed loud and long.

"Truth always amuses the ignorant," Helio said.

"Okay," Arnie said, "so I'm ignorant. I just get a kick out of you liking this warped kid, that's all. No offense. So you got something in common, you two? I'm not surprised." He swept up the book which Helio had been reading. "Pascal," he read. "*Provincial Letters*. Christ on the cross, what's the point of this?"

"The rhythms," Heli said, with patience. "Great prose establishes a cadence which attracts and holds the boy's wandering attention."

"Why does it wander?"

"From dread."

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"Dread of what?"

"Of death," Helio said.

Sobered, Arnie said, "Oh. Well, his death? Or just death in general?"

"This boy experiences his own old age, his lying in a dilapidated state, decades from now, in an old persons' home which is yet to be built here on Mars, a place of decay which he loathes beyond expression. In this future place he passes empty, weary years, bedridden, an object, not a person, kept alive through stupid legalities. When he tries to fix his eyes on the present, he almost at once is smitten by that dread vision of himself once again."

"Tell me about this old persons' home," Arnie said.

"It is to be built soon," Helio said. "Not for that purpose but as a vast dormitory for immigrants to Mars."

"Yeah," Arnie said, recognizing it. "In the F.D.R. Range."

"The people arrive," Helio said, "and settle and live, and drive the wild Bleekmen from their last refuge. In turn, the Bleekmen put a curse on the land, sterile as it is. The Earth settlers fail. Their buildings deteriorate year after year. Settlers return to Earth faster than they come here. At last this other use is made of the buildings. It becomes a home for the aged, for the poor, the senile and infirm."

"Why doesn't he talk? Explain that."

"To escape from his dread vision he retreats back to happier days, days inside his mother's body where there is no one else, no change, no time, no suffering. The Womb-life. He directs himself there, to the only happiness he has ever known. Mister, he refuses to leave that dear spot."

"I see," Arnie said, only half-believing the Bleekman.

"His suffering is like our own, like all other persons'. But in him it is worse, for he has his pre-knowledge, which we lack. It is a terrible knowledge to have. No wonder he has become — dark within."

"Yeah, he's as dark as you are," Arnie said, "and not outside, either, but like you said. Inside. How can you stand him?"

"I stand everything," the Bleekman said.

You know what I think?" Arnie said. "I think he does more than just see into time. I think he controls time."

The Bleekman's eyes became opaque. He shrugged.

"Doesn't he?" Arnie persisted. "Listen, Heliogabalus! This kid fooled around with last night. I know it. He saw it in advance and he tried to tamper with it. Was he trying to make it not happen? He was trying to halt time."

"Perhaps," Helio said.

"That's quite a talent," Arnie said. "Maybe he could go back into the past, like he wants to, and maybe alter the present. You keep working with him! Keep after this. Listen, has that Doreen Anderton called or stopped by this morning? I want to talk to her."

"No."

"You think I'm nuts? As to what I imagine about this kid and his possible abilities?"

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"You are driven by rage, Mister," the Bleekman said. "A man driven by rage may stumble, in his passion, onto truth."

"What a nut," Arnie said, disgusted. "Can't you just say yes or no? Do you have to babble like you do?"

Helio said, "Mister, I will tell you something about Mr. Bohlen, whom you wish to injure. He is very venerable—"

"Vulnerable," Arnie corrected.

"Thank you. He is frail, easily hurt. It should be easy for you to put an end to him. But however he has with him a charm, given to him by someone who loves him or perhaps by several who love him. A Bleekman water witch charm. It may guarantee him safety."

After an interval Arnie said, "We'll see."

"Yes," Helio said in a voice which Arnie had never heard him use before. "We will have to wait and see what strength still lives in such ancient items."

"The living proof that such junk is worthless is you yourself. That you'd rather be here, taking orders from me, serving me my food and sweeping the floor and hanging up my coat, than roaming around out on that Martian desert like you were when I found you. Out there like a dying beast, begging for water."

"Hmmm," the Bleekman murmured. "Possibly so."

"And keep that in mind," Arnie said. Or you might find yourself back out there again with your paka eggs and your arrows, stumbling along going nowhere, nowhere at all, he thought to himself. I'm doing you a big favor, letting you live here like a human.

In the early afternoon Arnie Kott received a message from Scott Temple. He placed it on the spindle of his decoding equipment, and soon he was listening to the message.

"We located this character's field, Arnie. It's out in the F.D.R. Range all right. He wasn't there, but a slave rocket had just landed. In fact, that's how we found it right off, we followed the trail of the rocket in. Anyhow, the guy had a large storage shed full of goodies. We took all the goodies, and they're in our warehouse now. Then we planted a seed type A-weapon and blew up the field and the shed and all the equipment lying around."

Good deal, Arnie thought.

"And like you said, so he'd realize who he's up against, we left a message. We stuck a note up on the remains of the landing field guidance tower that said, ARNIE KOTT DOESN'T LIKE WHAT YOU STAND FOR. How does that strike you, Arnie?"

"That strikes me fine," Arnie said aloud, although it did seem a little — what was the word? Corny.

The message continued, "And he'll discover it when he gets back. And I thought — this is my idea, subject to your correction — that we'd take a trip out there later in the week, just to be sure he's not rebuilding. Some of these independent operators are sort of screwy, like those guys last year that tried to set up their own telephone system. Anyhow, I

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believe that takes care of it. And by the way, he was using old Norb Steiner's gear; we found records around with Steiner's name on them. So you were right. It's a good thing we moved right onto this guy, because he could have been trouble."

The message ended. Arnie put the reel on his encoder, seated himself at the mike and answered.

"Scott, you did good. Thanks. I trust we've heard the last from that guy, and I approve your confiscating his stock. We can use it all. Drop by some evening and have a drink." He stopped the mechanism then and rewound the reel.

From the kitchen came the insistent, muffled sound of Heliogabalus reading aloud to Manfred Steiner. Hearing it, Arnie felt irritation, and then his resentment toward the Bleekman surged up. Why'd you let me get mixed up with Jack Bohlen when you could read the kid's mind? he demanded. Why didn't you speak up?

He felt outright hatred for Heliogabalus. You betrayed me too, he said to himself. Like the rest of them, Anne and Jack and Doreen. All of them.

Going to the kitchen door he yelled in, "You getting results, or aren't you?"

Heliogabalus lowered his book and said, "Mister, this requires time and effort."

"Time!" Arnie said. "Hell, that's the whole problem. Send him back into the past, say two years ago, and have him buy the Henry Wallace in my name. Can you do that?"

There was no answer. The question, to Heliogabalus, was too absurd even to consider. Flushing, Arnie slammed the kitchen door shut and stalked back into the living room.

Then have him send me back into the past, Arnie said to himself. This time-travel ability must be worth something. Why can't I get the kind of results I want? What's the matter with everyone?

They're making me wait just to annoy me, he said to himself.

And, he decided, I'm not going to wait much longer.

By one o'clock in the afternoon still no service calls had come from the Yee Company. Jack Bohlen, waiting by the phone in Doreen Anderton's apartment, knew that something was wrong.

At one-thirty he phoned Mr. Yee.

"I assumed that Mr. Kott would inform you, Jack," Mr. Yee said in his prosaic manner. "You are no longer my employee, Jack; you are his. Thank you for your fine service record."

Demoralized by the news, Jack said, "Kott bought my contract?"

"That is the case, Jack."

Jack hung up the phone.

"What did he say?" Doreen asked, watching him wide-eyed.

"I'm Arnie's."

"What's he going to do?"

"I don't know," he said. "I guess I better call him and find out. It doesn't look as if he's going to call me." Playing with me, he thought. Sadistic games . . . enjoying himself, perhaps.

"There's no use telephoning him,"

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Doreen said. "He never says anything on the phone. We'll have to go over to his place. I want to go along; please let me."

"Okay," he said, going to the closet to get his coat. "Let's go," he said to her.

XXI

At two o'clock in the afternoon Otto Zittle poked his head out the side door of the Bohlen house and ascertained that no one was watching. He could therefore leave safely, Silvia Bohlen realized as she saw what he was doing.

What have I done? she asked herself as she stood in the middle of the room. How can I expect to keep it secret? If Mrs. Steiner doesn't see, he'll surely tell that June Henessy and she'll blab it to everybody along the William Butler Yeats. She loves gossip. I know Jack will find out. And Leo might have come home early —

But it was too late now. Over and done with. Otto was gathering up his suitcases, preparing to depart.

I wish I was dead, she said to herself.

"Good-bye, Silvia," Otto said hurriedly as he started toward the front door. "I will call you."

She did not answer.

"Aren't you going to say good-bye?" he asked, pausing.

Shooting a glance at him she said, "No. And get out of here. Don't ever come back. I hate you, I really do."

He shrugged. "Why?"

"Because," she said, with perfect logic, "you're a horrible person. I never had anything to do with a person like you before. I must be out of my mind, it must be the loneliness."

He seemed genuinely hurt. Grunting, flushing red, he hung around. "It was as much your idea as mine," he mumbled finally, glaring at her.

"Go away," she said, turning her back to him.

At last the front door opened and shut. He had gone.

Never, never again, Silvia said to herself. She went to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom and got down her bottle of phenobarbital. Hastily pouring herself a glass of water she took 50 milligrams, gulping them down and gasping.

I shouldn't have been so mean to him, she realized in a flash of conscience. It wasn't fair; it wasn't really his fault, it was mine. If I'm no good, why blame him? If it hadn't been him it would have been someone else, sooner or later.

She thought, *Will he ever come back?* Or have I driven him off forever? Already she felt lonely, unhappy and completely at a loss once more, as if she were drifting in a hopeless vacuum for ever and ever.

He was actually very nice, she decided. I could have done a lot worse.

Going into the kitchen she seated herself at the table, picked up the telephone, and dialed June Henessy's number.

Presently June's voice sounded in her ear. "Hello?"

Silvia said, "Guess what."

"Tell me."

"Wait'll I light a cigarette." Silvia Bohlen lit a cigarette, got an ash-

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tray, moved her chair so that she was comfortable and began to tell her.

Flying across the dessert to his base in the F.D.R. Mountains, Otto Zitte ruminated on Mrs. Bohlen and congratulated himself. He was in a good mood.

So now what? Back to the field to have lunch, rest up, shave, shower and change his clothes . . . there would still be time enough to start out once more on an authentic selling trip with nothing else in mind this time except pure business itself.

Already he could see the ragged peaks of the mountains ahead. He would soon be there.

It seemed to him that he saw a plume of ugly gray smoke drifting up from the mountains directly ahead.

Frightened, he stepped up the velocity of the 'copter. No doubt of it; the smoke rose from at or near his field. They found me! he said to himself with a sob. The UN — they wiped me out and they're waiting for me! But he went on anyhow. He had to know for sure.

Below lay the remains of his field. A smoking, rubble-strewn ruin. He circled aimlessly, crying openly, tears spilling down his cheeks. There was no sign of the UN, however, no military vehicles or soldiers.

Could an incoming rocket have exploded?

Quickly, Otto landed the 'copter; on foot he ran across the hot ground, toward the debris that had been his storage shed.

As he reached the signal tower of the field he saw, pinned to it, a square of cardboard.

ARNIE KOTT DOESN'T LIKE WHAT YOU STAND FOR

Again and again he read it, trying to understand it. Arnie Kott — he was just getting ready to call on him! Arnie had been Norb's best customer. What did this mean? Had he already provided poor service to Arnie or how else maybe had he made Arnie mad? It didn't make sense; what had he done to Arnie Kott to deserve this?

Why? Otto asked. What did I do to you? Why have you destroyed me?

Presently he made his way over to the shed, hoping beyond hope that some of the stocks could be salvaged. Hoping to find something among the remains . . .

There were no remains. The stock had been taken. He saw no single can, glass jar, package or bag. The litter of the building itself, yes, but only that. Then they — those who had dropped the bomb — had come in first and pilfered the stock.

You bombed me, Arnie Kott, and you stole my goods, Otto said, as he wandered in a circle, clenching and unclenching his fists and darting glances of rage and frenzy up at the sky.

And still he did not understand why.

There has to be a reason, he said to himself. And I will find it out; I will not rest, damn you Arnie Kott, until I know. And when I find out I will get you. I will get you back for what you did.

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He blew his nose, snuffled, dragged himself back to his 'copter step by step, seated himself inside the 'copter and stared ahead for a long, long time.

At last he opened one of the suitcases. From it he took the .22 pistol. He sat holding it on his lap, thinking about Arnie Kott.

To Arnie Kott, Heliogabalus said, "Mister, excuse me for disturbing you. But if you are ready I will explain to you what you must do."

Delighted, Arnie stopped working at his desk. "Fire away."

With a sad and haughty expression on his face, Helio said, "You must take Manfred out onto the desert and cross, on foot, to the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Mountains. There your pilgrimage must end when you bring the boy to Dirty Knobby Rock which is sacred to the Bleekmen. Your answer lies there, when you have introduced the boy to Dirty Knobby."

Waggling his finger at the tame Bleekman, Arnie said slyly, "And you told me it was a fraud." He had known all the time that there was something to the Bleekman religion. Helio had tried to deceive him.

"At the sanctuary of the rock you must commune. The spirit which animates Dirty Knobby will receive your collective psyches and perhaps, if it is merciful, it will grant what you request." Helio added, "It is in actuality the capacity within the boy which you must depend on. The rock alone is powerless. However, it is as follows: time is weakest at that spot, where Dirty Knobby lies. Upon that fact the Bleekman has availed for centuries."

"I see," Arnie said. "A sort of puncture in time. And you guys get at the future through it. Well, it's the past I'm interested in now, and frankly this all sounds fishy to me. But I'll try it. You've told me so many different yarns about that rock —"

Helio said, "What I said before is true. Alone, Dirty Knobby could have done nothing for you." He did not cringe; he met Arnie's gaze.

"You think Manfred will cooperate?"

"I have told him of the rock and he is excited at the idea of seeing it. I said that one, in that place, might escape backward into the past. That idea enthralls him. However —" Helio paused. "You must repay the boy for his effort."

"Like how?"

"You can offer him something of priceless value . . . Mister, you can banish the specter of AM-WEB from his life forever. Promise him that you will send him back Home to Earth. Then no matter what becomes of him he will never see the interior of that abominable building. If you do that for him, he will turn all his mental powers in your behalf.

"It sounds fine to me," Arnie said.

"And you will not fail the boy."

"Oh, heck no," Arnie promised. "I'll make all the arrangements with the UN right away. It's complicated. But I got lawyers who can handle stuff like that without even trying."

"Good," Helio said, nodding. "It

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would be foul to let they boy down. If you could for a moment experience his terrible anxiety about his future life in that place —"

"Yeah, it sounds awful," Arnie agreed.

"What a shame it would be," Helio said, eying him, "if you yourself did ever have to endure that."

"Where is Manfred right now?"

"He is walking about the streets of Lewistown," Helio said. "Taking in the sights."

"Cripes, is it safe?"

"I think so," Helio said. "He is much excited by the people and stores and activity. It is all new to him."

"You sure have helped that kid," Arnie said.

The doorchimes sounded, and Helio went to answer. When the door opened, there stood Jack Bohlen and Doreen Anderton, both of them with fixed, high-strung expressions.

"Oh, hi," Arnie said, preoccupied. "Come on in. I was about to call you, Jack. Listen, I got a job for you."

Jack Bohlen said, "Why did you buy my contract from Mr. Yee?"

Because I need you," Arnie said. "I'll tell you why right now. I'm going on a pilgrimage with Manfred and I want somebody to circle around overhead so we don't get lost and die of thirst. We got to walk across the desert to the F.D.R. Mountains. Isn't that right, Helio?"

"Yes, Mister," Helio said.

"I want to get started right away," Arnie explained. "I figure it's about a five-day hike. We'll take a portable communications rig with us so we can notify you when we need something like food or water. At night you can land the 'copter and pitch a tent for us to sleep in. Make sure you got medical supplies on board in case either Manfred or I get bit by a desert animal. I hear there's Martian snakes and rats running around wild out there." He examined his watch. "It's three now. I'd like to get started by four and get in maybe five hours tonight."

"What's the purpose of this — pilgrimage?" Doreen asked presently.

"I got business out there to attend to," Arnie said. "Are you coming along in the 'copter? If so you better put on something different, maybe boots and heavy pants, because it's always possible you fellas might get forced down. That's a long time to keep circling, five days. Make sure in particular about the water."

Doreen and Jack looked at each other.

"I'm serious," Arnie said. "So let's not stop to mess around. Okay?"

"As far as I can tell," Jack said to Doreen, "I have no choice. I have to do what he tells me."

"That's the truth, buddy," Arnie agreed. "So start rounding up the merchandise we'll need. Portable stove to cook on, portable light, portable bathroom, food and soap and towels, gun of some sort. You know what we'll need. You've been living on the edge of the desert."

Jack nodded slowly.

"What is this business?" Doreen

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said. "And why do you have to walk? If you have to go there, why can't you fly as you usually do?"

"I just have to walk," Arnie said with irritation. "That's the way it is. It wasn't my idea." To Helio he said, "I can fly back, can't I?"

"Yes, Mister," Helio said. "You may return any way you prefer."

"It's a good thing I'm in top-notch physical shape," Arnie said, "or this would be out of the question. I hope Manfred can make it."

"He is quite strong, Mister," Helio said.

"So you're taking the boy," Jack murmured.

"That's right," Arnie said. "Any objections?"

Jack Bohlen did not answer, but he looked more grim than ever. Suddenly he burst out, "You can't make the boy walk five days across the desert! It'll kill him."

"Why can't you go in some surface vehicle?" Doreen asked. "One those little tractor-jitneys that the UN post office people use to deliver the mail. It would still take a long time. It would still be a pilgrimage."

"What about that?" Arnie said to Helio.

After some reflection, the Bleekman said, "I suppose that little cart of which you speak would do."

"Fine," Arnie said, deciding then and there. "I'll phone a couple of guys I know and pick up one of those PO jitneys. That's a good idea you gave me, Doreen. I appreciate it. Of course, you two still have to be overhead to make sure we don't break down."

Both Jack and Doreen nodded.

"Maybe when I get there, where I'm going," Arnie said, "you'll maybe find out what I'm up to." In fact you darn well are going to, he said to himself; there's no doubt about that.

"This is all very strange," Doreen said. She stood close to Jack Bohlen, holding onto his arm.

"Don't blame me," Arnie said. "Blame Helio." He grinned.

"That is true," Helio said. "It was my idea."

But their expressions remained.

"Talked to your dad yet today?" Arnie asked Jack.

"Yes. Briefly, on the phone."

"His claim filed now, all recorded? No hitches?"

Jack said, "He says it was processed properly. He's preparing to return to Earth."

"Efficient operation," Arnie said, "I admire that. Shows up here on Mars, stakes out his claim, goes to the abstract office and records it, then flies back. Not bad."

"What are you up to, Arnie?" Jack said in a quiet voice.

Arnie shrugged. "I got this holy pilgrimage to make, along with Manfred. That's all." He was, however, still grinning; he could not help it. He could not stop, and he did not bother to try.

Use of the UN post office jitney cut the proposed pilgrimage from Lewistown to Dirty Knobby from five days to a mere eight hours. So Arnie calculated. Nothing to do now but go, he said to himself as he paced about his living room.

Outside the building, at the curb,

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Helio sat in the parked jitney with Manfred. Through the window Arnie could see them, far below. He got his gun from his desk drawer, strapped it on inside his coat, locked up the desk and hurried out into the hall.

A moment later he emerged on the sidewalk and made for the jitney.

"Here we go," he said to Manfred. Helio stepped from the jitney, and Arnie seated himself behind the tiller. He revved up the tiny turbine engine; it made a noise like a bumble bee in a bottle. "Sounds good," he said heartily. "So long, Helio. If this goes okay, there's a reward for you — remember that."

"I expect no reward," Helio said. "I am only doing my duty by you, Mister. I would do it for anyone."

Releasing the parking brake, Arnie pulled out into downtown Lewistown late-afternoon traffic. They were on their way. Overhead, Jack Bohlen and Doreen were no doubt cruising in the 'copter. Arnie did not bother to search for sign of them; he took it for granted that they were there. He waved good-by to Helio, and then a huge tractor bus filled in all the space behind the jitney. Helio was cut off from view.

"How about this, Manfred?" Arnie said, as he guided the jitney toward the perimeter of Lewistown and the desert beyond. "Isn't this something? It makes almost fifty miles an hour, and that isn't hay."

The boy did not respond, but his body trembled with excitement.

"This is the nuts," Arnie declared, in answer to his own query.

They had almost left Lewistown when Arnie became aware of a car which had pulled up beside them and was proceeding at the same speed as they. He saw, within the car, two figures, a man and a woman. At first he thought it was Jack and Doreen, and then he discovered that the woman was his ex-wife Anne Esterhazy and the man was Doctor Milton Glaub.

What the hell do they want? Arnie wondered. Can't they see I'm busy, I can't be bothered, whatever it is?

"Kott," Doctor Glaub yelled, "pull over to the curb so we can talk to you! This is vital!"

"The hell!" Arnie said, increasing the speed of the post office jitney. He felt with his left hand for his gun. "I got nothing to say, and what are you two doing in cahoots?" He didn't like the look of it one bit. Just like them to gang up, he said to himself. I should have expected it. Snapping on the portable communications rig, he put in a call to his Steward, Eddy Goggins at Union Hall. "This is Arnie. My gyrocompass point is 8.45702, right at the edge of town. Get over here quick! I got a party that has to be took care of. Make it fast, they're gaining on me." They had, in fact, never fallen behind. It was easy for them to match the speed of the little jitney, and even to exceed it.

"Will do, Arnie," Eddy Goggins said. "I'll send some of the boys on the double; don't worry."

Now the car edged ahead and drew toward the curb. Arnie reluctantly slowed the jitney to a stop. The car placed itself in a position to block escape, and then Glaub jumped

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from it and scuttled up crablike to the jitney, waving his arms.

"This ends your career of bullying and domineering," he shouted at Arnie.

Keerist, Arnie thought. At a time like this. "What do you want?" he said. "Make it snappy; I got business."

Leave Jack Bohlen alone," Doctor Glaub panted. "I represent him and he needs rest and quiet. You'll have to deal with me!"

From the car Anne Esterhazy emerged. She approached the jitney and confronted Arnie. "As I understand the situation —" she began.

"You understand nothing," Arnie said, with venom. "Let me by, or I'll take care of both of you."

Overhead, a 'copter with the Water Workers' Union marking on it appeared and began to descend. It was Jack and Doreen, Arnie guessed. And behind it came a second 'copter at tremendous speed, no doubt Eddy and the Goodmembers. Both 'copters prepared to land close by.

Anne Esterhazy said, "Arnie, I know that something bad is going to happen to you if you do what you're doing."

"To me?" he said, amused and incredulous.

"I feel it. Please, Arnie. Whatever it is you're up to — think twice. There's so much good in the world. Must you have your revenge?"

"Go back to New Israel and tend your damn store." He fast-idled the motor of the jitney.

"That boy," Anne said. "That's Manfred Steiner, isn't it? Let Milton take him back to Camp B-G. It's better for everyone, better for you and for him."

One of the 'copters had landed. From it hopped three or four WWU men. They came running up the street, and Doctor Glaub, seeing them, plucked Anne's sleeve.

"I see them." She remained unruffled. "Please, Arnie. You and I have worked together so often, on so many worthwhile things. For my sake. For Sam's sake! If you go ahead with this I know you and I will never be together again in any way whatever. Can't you feel that? Is this so important as all that, to lose so much?"

Arnie said nothing.

Puffing, Eddy Goggins appeared beside the jitney. The union men fanned out toward Anne Esterhazy and Doctor Glaub. Now the other 'copter had landed, and from it stepped Jack Bohlen.

"Ask him," Arnie said. "He's coming of his own free will. He's a grown man, he knows what he's doing. Ask him if he isn't voluntarily coming along on this pilgrimage."

As Glaub and Anne Esterhazy turned toward Jack, Arnie Kott backed up the jitney. He shifted into forward and shot around the side of the parked car. A scuffle broke out, as Glaub tried to get back into the car; two Goodmembers grabbed him and they wrestled. Arnie steered the jitney straight ahead, and the car and the people fell behind.

"Here we go," he said to Manfred.

Ahead, the street became a vague level strip passing from the city out

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onto the desert in the direction of the hills far beyond. The jitney bumped along at near top speed, and Arnie smiled. Beside him the boy's face shone with excitement.

Nobody can stop me, Arnie said to himself.

The sounds of the squabble faded from his ears. He heard only the buzz of the tiny turbine of the jitney. He settled back.

Dirty Knobby, get ready, he said to himself. And then he thought of Jack Bohlen's magic charm, the water witch which Helio said the man had on him, and Arnie frowned. But the frown was momentary. He did not slow down.

Beside him Manfred crowed excitedly, "Gubble gubble!"

"What's that 'gubble gubble' mean?" Arnie asked.

There was no answer, as the two of them bounced along in the UN post office jitney toward the F.D.R. Mountains directly ahead.

Maybe I'll find out what it means when we get there, Arnie said to himself. I'd like to know. For some reason the sounds which the boy made, the unintelligible words, made him nervous, more so than anything else. He wished suddenly that Helio was along.

"Gubble gubble!" Manfred cried as they sped along.

XXII

The black, lopsided projection of sandstone and volcanic glass which was Dirty Knobby poked up huge and gaunt ahead of them in the glow of early morning. They had spent the night on the desert, in a tent, the 'copter parked close by. Jack Bohlen and Doreen Anderton had exchanged no words with them. At dawn the 'copter had taken off to circle overhead. Arnie and the boy Manfred Steiner had eaten a good breakfast and then packed up and resumed their trip.

Now the pilgrimage to the sacred rock of the Bleekmen was over.

Seeing Dirty Knobby close up like this, Arnie thought, there's the place that'll cure us all of whatever ails us. Letting Manfred take the tiller of the jitney, he consulted the map which Heliogabalus had drawn. It showed the path up into the range to the rock. There was, Helio had told him, a hollowed-out chamber on the north side of the rock, when a Bleekman priest could generally be found. Unless, Arnie said to himself, he's off somewhere sleeping off a binge. He knew the Bleekmen priests. They were old winos, for the most part. Even the Bleekmen had contempt for them.

At the base of the first hill, in the shadows, he parked the jitney and shut off its engine. "From here we climb on foot," he said to Manfred. "We'll carry as much gear as we can, food and water naturally and the communictions rig. I guess if we need to cook we can come back for the stove. It's only supposed to be a few more miles."

The boy hopped from the jitney. He and Arnie unloaded the gear, and soon they were trudging up a rocky trial, into the F.D.R. Range.

Glancing about with apprehension. Manfred huddled and shivered.

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Perhaps the boy was experiencing AM-WEB once more, Arnie conjectured. The Henry Wallace was only a hundred miles from here. The boy might well have picked up the emanations of the structures to come, close as they were now. In fact he could almost feel them himself.

Or was it the rock of the Bleekmen which he felt?

He did not like the sight of it. Why make a shrine out of this? he asked himself. Perverse, this arid place. But maybe a long time ago this region had been fertile. Evidence of one-time Bleekman camps could be made out along the path. Maybe the Martians had originated here. It certainly had an old, used appearance. As if, he thought, a million gray-black creatures had handle all this throughout the ages. And now what was it? A last remains for a dying race. Relic for those who were not going to be around much longer.

Wheezing from the exertion of climbing with a heavy load, Arnie halted. Manfred toiled up the steep acclivity after him, still casting anxiety-stricken looks around.

"Don't worry," Arnie said encouragingly. "There's nothing here to be scared of." Was the boy's talent already blending with that of the rock? And, he wondered, had the rock itself become apprehensive too? Was it capable of that?

The trail leveled out and became wider. All was in shadow. Cold and damp hung over everything, as if they were treading within a great tomb. The vegetation that grew thin and noxious along the surface of rocks had a dead quality to it, as if something had poisoned it in its act of growing. And ahead lay a dead bird on the path, a rotten corpse that might have been there for weeks; he could not tell. It had a mummified appearance.

I sure don't enjoy this place, Arnie said to himself.

Halting at the bird, Manfred bent down and said, "Gubbish."

"Yeah," Arnie murmured. "Come on, let's go."

They arrived all at once at the base of the rock.

Wind rustled the leaves of vegetation, the shrubs which looked as if they had been skinned down to their elements; bare and picked-over, like bones stuck upright in the soil. The wind emerged from a crack in Dirty Knobby and it smelled, he thought, as if some sort of animal lived there. Maybe it was the priest himself. He saw with no real surprise an empty wine bottle lying off to one side with bits of debris caught on the sharp foliage nearby.

"Anybody around?" Arnie called.

After a long time an old man, a Bleekman, gray as if wrapped in webs, edged out of the chamber within the rock. The wind seemed to blow him along, so that he crept sideways, pausing against the side of the cavity and then stirring forward once more. His eyes were red-rimmed.

"You old drunk," Arnie said in a low voice. And then from a piece of paper Helio had given him he greeted the old man in Bleeky.

The priest mumbled a toothless, mechanical response.

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"Here," Arnie held out a carton of cigarettes. The priest, mumbling, sidled forward and took the carton in his claws; he tucked the carton beneath his gray, webbed robes. "You like that, huh?" Arnie said. "I thought you would."

From the piece of paper he read, in Bleeky, the purpose of his visit and what he wanted the priest to do. He wanted the priest to leave him and Manfred in peace for an hour or so, at the chamber, so that they could summon the spirit of the rock.

Still mumbling, the priest backed away He fussed with the hem of his robes, then turned and shambled off. He disappeared down a side trail without a backward look at Arnie and Manfred.

Arnie turned the paper over and read the instructions that Helio had written out.

(One), Enter chamber.

Taking Manfred by the arm, he led him step by step into the dark cleft of the rock. Flashing on his light, he led the boy until the chamber became large. It still smelled bad, he thought, as if it had been kept closed up for centuries. Like and old box full of decayed rags, now, a vegetable rather than animal scent.

Now what? Again he consulted Helio's paper.

(two), Light fire.

An uneven ring of boulders surrounded a blackened pit in which lay fragments of wood and what appeared to be bones. It looked as if the old wino fixed his meals here.

In his pack Arnie had kindling. He got it out now, laying the pack on the floor of the cavern and fumbling stiff-fingered with the straps. "Don't get lost, kid," he said to Manfred. I wonder if we're ever coming out of here again? he asked himself.

Both of them felt better, however, when the fire had been lit. The cavern became warmer, but not dry. The smell of mold persisted and even seemed to become stronger, as if the fire were attracting it, whatever *it* was.

The next instruction bewildered him, it did not seem to fit in, but nonetheless he complied.

(three), Turn on portable radio to 574 kc.

Arnie laid down the little Japanese-made transistor portable and turned it on. At 574 kc nothing but static issued forth. It seemed, though to obtain a response from the rock around them. He felt the rock change and become more alert, as if the noise from the radio had awakened it to their presence. The next instruction was equally annoying.

(four), Take Nembutal (boy not take).

Using the canteen, Arnie swallowed the Nembutal down, wondering if its purpose was to blur his senses and make him credulous. Or was it to stifle his anxiety?

Only one instruction remained.

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(five), Throw enclosed packet onto fire.

Helio had put into Arnie's pack a small paper, a wadded-up page of the spacemail New York *Times* with some kind of grass within it. Kneeling by the fire, Arnie carefully unwrapped the packet and dumped the dark, dry strands into the flames. A nauseating smell arose and the flames died down. Smoke billowed out, filling the chamber. He heard Manfred cough. Goddam, Arnie thought, it'll kill us yet if we keep on.

The smoke disappeared almost at once.

The cavern seemed now dark and empty and much larger than before, as if the rock around them had receded. He felt, all at once, as if he was going to fall; he seemed no longer to be standing precisely upright. Sense of balance gone, he realized. Nothing whatsoever to use as bearing.

"Manfred," he said, "now listen. On account of me you don't have to worry about that AM-WEB any more, like Helio explained. You got that? Okay. Now regress back around three weeks. Can you do that? Really put your back into it. Try hard as you can."

In the gloom the boy peeped at him, eyes wide with fear.

"Back to before I knew Jack Bohlen," Arnie said. "Before I met him out on the desert that day those Bleekmen were dying of thirst. You get it?" He walked stumblingly toward the boy—

He fell flat on his face.

The Nembutal, he thought. Better get back up before I pass out entirely. He struggled up, groping for something to catch onto. Light flared, searing him; he put up his hands . . . and then he was in water.

Warm water poured over him, in his face; he spluttered, choked, saw around him billowing steam, felt beneath his feet familiar tile.

He was in his steam bath.

Voices of men conversing. Eddy's voice, saying, "Right, Arnie." Then the outline of shapes around him, other men taking showers.

Down inside him, near his groin, his duodenal ulcer began to burn and he realized that he was terribly hungry. He stepped from the shower and with weak, unwilling legs padded across the warm, wet tile, searching for the attendant so that he could get his great terrycloth bathtowel.

I been here before, he thought. I've done all this, said what I'm going to say. It's uncanny! What do they call it French word . . .

Better get some breakfast. His stomach rumbled and the ulcer pain increased.

"Hey, Tom," he called to the attendant. "Dry me off and get me dressed so I can go eat. My ulcer's killing me." He had never felt such pain from it before.

"Right, Arnie," the attendant said, stepping toward him, holding the huge soft white towel out.

When he had been dressed by the attendant, in his gray flannel trousers and t-shirt, soft leather boots and nautical cap, Goodmember Arn-

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ie Kott left the steam bath and crossed the corridor of the Union Hall to his dining room, where Heliogabalus had his breakfast waiting.

At least he sat before a stack of hotcakes and bacon, genuine Home coffee, a glass of orange juice from New Israel oranges and the previous week's New York *Times*, the Sunday edition.

He trembled with consternation as he reached to pick up the glass of chilled, strained, sweet orange juice. The glass was slippery and smooth to the touch and almost eluded him in mid-trip.

He thought, I have to be careful, slow down and take it easy. *It's really so; I'm back here where I was, several weeks ago. Manfred and the rock of the Bleekmen did it together.* Wow, he thought, his mind a hubbub of anticipation. This is something! He sipped at the orange juice, enjoying each swallow of it until the glass had been emptied.

I got what I wanted, he said to himself.

Now, I have to be careful, he told himself; there are some things I sure don't want to change. I want to be sure I don't foul up my black-market business by doing the natural thing and interfering so that old Norb Steiner doesn't take his own life. I mean, it's sad about him. But I don't intend to get out of the business; so that stays as it is. As it's going to be, he corrected himself.

Mainly I got two things to do. First, I see that I got a legal deed to land in the F.D.R. Range all around Henry Wallace area, and that deed'll predate old man Bohlen's deed by several weeks. So the hell with the old speculator, flying out here from Earth.

When he does come, weeks from now, he'll discover the land's been bought. Trip all the way here and back for nothing. Maybe he'll have a heart attack. Arnie chuckled, thinking about that. Too bad.

And then the other thing. Jack Bohlen himself.

I'm going to fix him, he said to himself, a guy I haven't met yet, that doesn't know me, although I know him.

What I am to Jack Bohlen now is *fate.*

"Good morning, Mr. Kott." Annoyed at having his meditation interrupted, he glanced up and saw that a girl had entered the room and was standing by his desk expectantly. He did not recognize her. A girl from the secretary pool, he realized, come to take the morning's dictation.

"Call me Arnie," he muttered. "Everybody's supposed to call me that. How come you didn't know? You new around here?"

The girl, he thought, was not too good-looking, and he returned to his newspaper. But on the other hand, she had a heavy, full figure. The black silk dress she wore: there isn't much on under that, he said to himself as he observed her around the side of the newspaper. Not married. He saw no wedding ring on her finger . . . he knew always to look for that.

"Come over here," he said. "You scared of me because I'm the fa-

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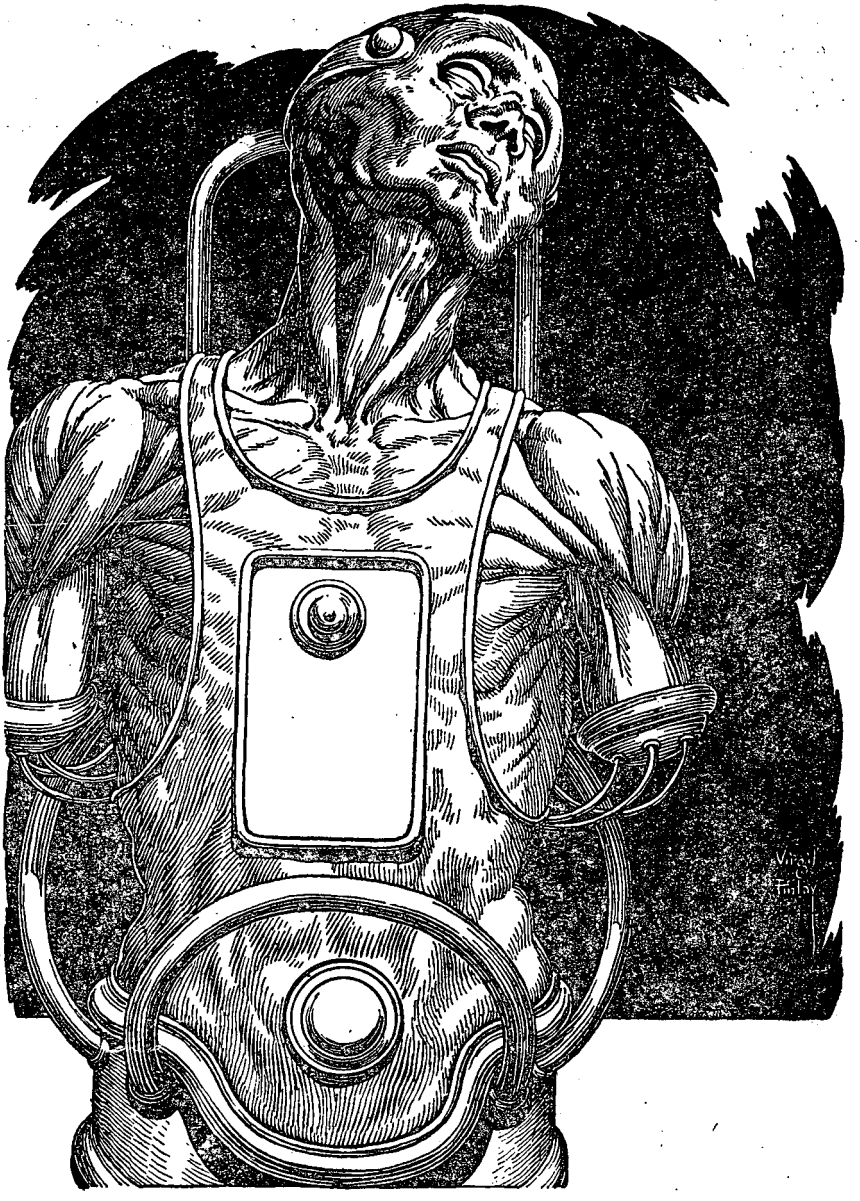

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mous great Arnie Kott, in charge of this whole place?"

The girl approached in a luxuriant sidling motion that surprised him. She seemed to creep sideways over to the desk. And in an insinuating, hoarse voice she said, "No, Arnie, I'm not scared of you." Her blunt stare did not seem to be one of innocence. On the contrary, its implied knowledge jolted him. It seemed to him as if she were conscious of every whim and urge in him, especially those dealing with her.

"You been working here long?" he asked.

"No, Arnie." She moved closer, now, and rested against the edge of the desk so that one leg — he could hardly believe it — gradually came in contact with his own.

Methodically, her leg undulated against his own in a simple, reflexive, rhythmic way that made him recoil and say weakly, "Hey."

"What's the matter, Arnie?" the girl said, and smiled. It was a smile like nothing he had ever seen in his life before, cold and yet full of intimation; utterly without warmth, as if a machine had stamped it there, constructed it by pattern out of lips, teeth, tongue . . . and yet it swamped him with its sensuality. It poured forth a saturated, sipping heat that made him sit rigid in his chair, unable to look away. Mostly it was the tongue, he thought. It vibrated. The end had a pointed quality, as if it were good at cutting. A tongue that could hurt, that enjoyed slitting into something alive, tormenting it and making it beg for mercy. That was the part it liked most, to hear the pleas. The teeth were white and sharp, made for rending.

He shivered.

"Do I bother you, Arnie?" the girl murmured. She had, by degrees, slid her body along the desk so that now she rested almost entirely against him. It was impossible.

"Listen," he said, swallowing and finding his throat dry. He could hardly croak out words at her. "Get going and let me read my newspaper." Grabbing up the paper he held it between himself and her. "Go on," he said gratingly.

The shape ebbed a little. "What's the matter, Arnie?" her voice purred, like metal wheels rubbing, an automatic sound coming forth from her, like a recording.

He said nothing. He gripped his paper and read.

When he next looked up the girl had gone. He was alone.

I don't remember that, he said to himself, quaking inside down deep within his stomach. What kind of creature was that? I don't get it; what was happening, just then?

Instinctively, he began reading an item in the paper about a ship which had been lost in deep space, a freighter from Japan carrying a cargo of bicycles. He felt amused, even though three hundred people aboard had perished. It was just too damned funny, the idea of all those thousands of little light Jap bikes floating as debris, circling the sun forever. Not that they weren't needed on Mars, with its virtual lack of power sources. A man could pedal free of cost for hundreds of miles, in the slight gravity.

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Reading further, he came across an item about a reception at the White House for — he squinted.

The words seemed to run together; he could hardly read them. Printing error of some kind? What–did it say? He held the newspaper closer.

Gubble gubble, it said.

The article became meaningless, nothing but the gubble-gubble words one after another. Good grief! He stared at it in disgust, his stomach reacting. His duodenal ulcer hurt worse than ever. He had become tense and angry, the worst possible combination for an ulcer patient, especially at meal time. Darn those gubble-gubble words, he said to himself. That's what that kid says! They sure spoil the article in the paper.

Glancing through the paper he saw that almost all the articles devolved into nonsense after a line or so. His irritation grew, and he tossed the paper away. What the hell good is it like that? he asked himself

That's that schizophrenia talk, he realized. Private language. I don't like that here at all. It's okay if he wants to talk like that himself, but it doesn't belong here! He's got no right to push that stuff into my world. And then Arnie thought, of course, he did bring me back here, so maybe he thinks that does give him the right. Maybe the boy thinks of this as his world.

That thought did not please Arnie. He wished it had never come to him.

Getting up from his desk he went over to the window and looked down at the street of Lewistown far below. People hurrying along; how fast they went. And the cars, too. Why so fast? There was an unpleasant kinetic quality to their movements. A jerkiness. They seemed either to bang into one another or to be about to. Colliding objects like billiard balls, hard and dangerous. The buildings, he noticed, seemed to bristle with sharp corners. And yet, when he tried to pinpoint the change — and it was a change; no doubt of that — he could not. This was the familiar scene he saw every day. And yet —

Are they moving too fast? Is that it? No, it was deeper than that. There was an omnipresent *hostility* in everything. Things did not merely collide. They struck one another, as if doing it deliberately.

And then he saw something which made him gasp. The people on the street below, hurrying back and forth, had almost no faces, just fragments or remnants of faces . . as if they had never formed.

Aw, this will never do, Arnie said to himself. He felt fear now, deeply and intensely. What's going on?

Shaken, he returned to his desk and reseated himself. He drank his coffee, trying to forget the scene below, trying to resume his routine of the morning.

The coffee had a bitter, acrid foreign taste to it. He had to set the cup back down at once. I suppose the kid imagines all the time he's being poisoned.

Unlocking his desk, Arnie got out the battery-powered encoded dictation machine. Into it he said, "Scott, I got a terribly impor-,

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tant item here to transmit to you. I insist you act on this at once. What I want to do is buy into the F.D.R. Mountains because the UN is going to establish a gigantic housing tract area there, specifically around the Henry Wallace Canyon. Now you transfer enough Union funds, in my name, of course, to insure that I get title to all that, because in about two weeks speculators from —

He broke off, for the encoding machine had groaned to a stop. He poked at it. The reels turned slowly and then once more settled back into silence.

Thought it was fixed, Arnie thought angrily. Didn't that Jack Bohlen work on it? And then he remembered that this was back in the past before Jack Bohlen had been called in. Of course it didn't work.

I've got to dictate it to that secretary-creature, he realized. He started to press the button on his desk that would summon her, but drew back. How can I let that back in here? he asked himself. But there was no alternative. He pressed the button.

The door opened and she reentered. "I knew you would want me, Arnie," she said, strutting toward him.

"Listen!" he shouted. "Don't get too close to me. I can't stand it when people get too close." But even as he spoke he recognized his fears for what they were. It was a basic fear of the schizophrenic that people might get too close to him, might encroach into his space. *Nearness fear, it* was called. It was due to the schizophrenic sensing hostility in everyone around him. That's what I'm doing, Arnie thought. And yet, even knowing this, he could not endure having the girl come close to him. He got abruptly to his feet and walked back to the window.

"Anything you say, Arnie," the girl said, in a tone that was insatiable. Despite what she said she crept toward him until, as before, she was almost touching him. He found himself hearing the noises of her breathing, smelling her sour body-scent, her breath, which was thick and unpleasant . . . he felt choked.

"I'm going to dictate to you now," he said, walking away from her, keeping distance between the two of them. "This is to Scott Temple. It should go in code so they can't read it." They, he thought. Well, that had always been his fear. He couldn't blame that on the boy. "I got a terribly important item here," he dictated. "Act on it at once. It means plenty, it's a real inside tip. The UN's going to buy a huge hunk of land in the F.D.R. Mountains —"

On and on he dictated, and even as he talked a fear assailed him, an obsessive fear that grew each moment. Suppose she was just writing down those gubble-gubble words? I just got to look, he told himself. I got to walk over close to her and see. But he shrank from the closeness.

"Listen, miss," he said, interrupting himself. "Give me that pad of yours. I want to see what you're writing."

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"Arnie," she said in her rough, dragging voice, "you can't tell anything by looking at it."

"W-what?" he demanded in fright.

"It's in shorthand." She smiled at him coldly, with what seemed palpable malevolence.

"Okay," he said, giving up. He went on and completed his dictation, then told her to get it into code and off to Scott at once.

"And what then?" she said.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, Arnie," she said, and the tone in which she said it made him cringe with dismay and pure physical disgust.

"Nothing after that," he said. "Just get out. Don't come back." Following after her, he slammed the door shut behind her.

I guess, he decided, I'll have to contact Scott direct. I can't trust her. Seating himself at the desk he picked up the telephone and dialed.

Presently the line was ringing. But it rang in vain; there was no response. Why? he wondered. Has he run out on me? Is he against me? Working with them? I can't trust him; I can't trust anybody. And then, all at once, a voice said, "Hello. Scott Temple speaking." And he realized that only a few seconds and a few rings actually had gone by. All those thoughts of betrayal and doom had flitted through his mind in an instant.

"This is Arnie."

"Hi, Arnie. What's up? I can tell by your tone something's cooking. Spill it."

My sense of time is fouled up, Arnie realized. It seemed to me the phone rang for half an hour, but it wasn't at all.

"Arnie," Scott was saying. "Speak up. Are you there?"

It's the schizophrenic confusion, Arnie realized. It's basically a breakdown in time-sense. Now I'm getting it because that kid has it.

"Arnie-" Scott said, outraged.

With difficulty, Arnie broke his chain of thoughts and said, "Uh, Scott, listen, I got an inside scoop. We have to act on this right now, you understand?" In detail, he told Scott about the UN and the F.D.R. Mountain Range. "So you can see," he wound up, "it's worth it to us to buy in with all we got, and pronto. You agree?"

"You're sure of this scoop?" Scott said.

"Yeah, I am! I am!"

"How come? Frankly, Arnie although I like you, I know you get crazy schemes. You're always flying off at a tangent. I'd hate to get stuck with that dog's breakfast F.D.R. land."

Arnie said, "Take my word for it."

"I can't."

He could not believe his ears. "We been working together for years, and it's always been on a word-of-mouth confidence basis," he choked. "What's going on, Scott?"

"That's what I'm asking you," Scott said calmly. "How come a man of your business experience could bite on this phony nothing so-called scoop? The scoop is that the F.D.R. Range is worthless, and you know it. I know you know it. Everybody knows it. So what are you up to?"

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"You don't *trust* me?"

"Why should I trust you? Prove you got real inside scoop stuff here, and not just your usual hot air."

With difficulty, Arnie said, "Hell, man, if I could prove it, you wouldn't have to trust. It wouldn't involve trust. Okay, I'll go into this alone, and when you find out what you missed, blame yourself, not me." He slammed down the phone, shaking with rage and despair. What a thing to happen! He couldn't believe it. Scott Temple, the one person in the world he could do business with over the phone. The rest of them you could throw in the ocean, they were such crooks . . .

It's a misunderstanding, he told himself. But based on a deep, fundamental, insidious distrust. A schizophrenic distrust.

A collapse, he realized, of the ability to communicate.

Standing up, he said aloud, "I guess I got to go to Pax Grove myself and see the abstract people. Put in my claim." And then he remembered. He would have to first stake his claim, actually go to the site, in the F.D.R. Mountains. And everything in him shrieked out in rebellion at that. At that hideous place, where the building would one day appear, that old folks' home, AM-WEB.

Well, there was no way out. First have a stake made for him in one of the Union shops, then take a 'copter and head for the Henry Wallace.

It seemed an agonizingly difficult series of actions to accomplish. How could he do all that? First he would have to find some Union metal worker who could engrave his name for him on the stake. That might take days. Who did he know in the shops here in Lewistown who could do it for him? And if he didn't know the guy, how could he trust him?

At last, as if swimming against an intolerable current, he managed to lift the receiver from the hook and place the call to the shop.

I'm so tired I can hardly move, he realized. Why? What have I done so far today? His body felt crushed flat with fatigue. *If only I could get some rest,* he said to himself. *If only I could sleep . . .*

It was late in the afternoon before Arnie Kott was able to procure the metal stake with his name engraved on it from the Union shop and make arrangements for a WWU 'copter to fly him to the F.D.R. Mountains.

"Hi, Arnie," the pilot greeted him, a pleasant-faced young man from the Union's pilot pool.

"Hi, my boy," Arnie murmured, as the pilot assisted him into the comfortable, special leather seat which had been built for him at the settlement's fabric and upholstery shop. As the pilot got into the seat ahead of him, Arnie said, "Now let's hurry, because I'm late. I got to get all the way there and then to the abstract office at Pax Grove."

And I know we won't make it, he said to himself. *There just isn't enough time.*

XXIII

The Water Workers' Union 'copter with Goodmember Arnie Kott in it had hardly gotten into the

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air when the loudspeaker came on.

"Emergency announcement. There is a small party of Bleekmen out on the open desert at gyrocompass point 4.65003 dying from exposure and lack of water. Ships north of Lewistown are instructed to direct their flights to that point with all possible speed and give assistance. United Nations law requires all commercial and private ships to respond."

The announcement was repeated in the crisp voice of the UN announcer, speaking from the UN transmitter on the artificial satellite somewhere overhead.

Feeling the 'copter alter course, Arnie said, "Aw, come on, my boy." It was the last straw. They would never get to the F.D.R. Range, let alone to Pax Grove and the abstract office.

"I have to respond, sir," the pilot said. "It's the law."

Now they were above the desert, moving at good speed toward the intersect which the UN announcer had given. Arnie thought, we have to drop everything we're doing to bail them out, the damn fools. And the worst part of it is that I will meet Jack Bohlen now. It can't be avoided. I forgot about it. Now it is too late.

Patting his coat pocket he found the gun still there. That made him a little more cheerful. He kept his hand on it as the 'copter lowered for its landing. Hope we can beat him here, he thought. But to his dismay he saw that the Yee Company 'copter had landed ahead of him, and Jack Bohlen was already busy giving water to the five Bleekmen. Damn it, he thought.

"Do you need me?" Arnie's pilot called down from his seat. "If not I'll go on."

In answer Jack Bohlen called back, "I don't have much water for them." He mopped his face with his handkerchief.

"Okay," the pilot said, and switched off his blades.

To his pilot, Arnie said, "Tell him to step over here."

Hopping out with a five-gallon water can, the pilot strode over to Jack, and after a moment Jack ceased attending to the Bleekmen and walked toward Arnie Kott.

"You wanted me?" Jack said, standing there looking up at Arnie. "Yes," Arnie said. "I'm going to kill you." He brought out his pistol and aimed it at Jack Bohlen.

The Bleekmen had been filling their paka eggshells with water; now they stopped. A young male, dark and skinny, almost naked under the ruddy Martian sun, reached backward, behind him, to his quiver of poisoned arrows. He drew an arrow forward, fitting it onto his bow, and in a single motion he fired the arrow.

Arnie Kott saw nothing. He felt a sharp pain, and looked down to see the arrow protruding from his chest, slightly below the breastbone.

They read minds, Arnie thought. Intentions. He tried to pull the arrow out, but it would not budge. And then he realized that he was already dying. It was poisoned, and he felt it entering his limbs, stop-

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ping his circulation, rising upward to invest his brain and mind.

Jack Bohlen, standing below him, said, "Why would you want to kill me? You don't even know who I am."

"Sure I do," Arnie managed to grunt. "You're going to fix my encoder and take Doreen away from me, and your father will steal all I've got, all that matters to me, the F.D.R. Range and what's coming." He shut his eyes and rested.

"You must be crazy," Jack Bohlen said.

"Naw," Arnie said. "I know the future."

"Let me get you to a doctor," Jack Bohlen said, leaping up into the 'copter, pushing aside the dazed young pilot to inspect the protruding arrow. "They can give you an antidote if they get you in time." He clicked on the motor. The blades of the 'copter began to turn slowly and then more quickly.

"Take me to the Henry Wallace," Arnie muttered. "So I can drive my claim stake."

Jack Bohlen eyed him. "You're Arnie Kott, aren't you?" Getting the pilot out of the way he seated himself at the controls, and at once the 'copter began to rise into the air. "I'll take you to Lewistown; it's closest and they know you there."

Saying nothing, Arnie lay back, his eyes still shut. It had all gone wrong. He had not staked his claim and he had not done anything to Jack Bohlen. And now it was over.

Those Bleekmen, he thought as he felt Bohlen lifting him from the 'copter. It's those Bleemen's fault, from the start; if it wasn't for them I never would have met Jack Bohlen. I blame them for the whole thing.

Why wasn't he dead yet? He wondered as he felt himself tugged, lifted, jostled and carried. A lot of time had passed. The poison surely had gone all through him.

And yet he still felt, thought, understood . . . perhaps I can't die back here in the past, he said to himself. Maybe I got to linger on, unable to die and unable to return to my own time.

How did that young Bleekmen know so fast? They don't ordinarily use their arrows on Earth people. It's a capital crime. It means the end of them.

He thought, maybe they were expecting me. They conspired to save Bohlen because he gave them food and water. Arnie thought, I bet they're the ones who gave him the water witch. Of course. *And when they gave it to him they knew. They knew about all this, even back then, at the very beginning.*

I'm helpless in this terrible damn schizophrenic past of Manfred Steiner's. Let me back to my own world, my own time. I just want to get out of here! I don't want to stake my claim or harm anybody. I just want to be back at Dirty Knobby, in the cavern with that boy. Like I was. Please, Arnie thought. Manfred!

They—awesome — were wheeling him up a dark hall on a cart of some kind. Voices. Door opening, gleaming metal: surgical instruments. He saw masked faces, felt them lay him on a table. Help me, Manfred!

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He shouted down deep inside himself. They're going to kill me. You have to take me back. Do it now or forget it, because —

A mask of emptiness and total darkness appeared above him and was lowered. No, Arnie cried out. It's not over; it can't be the end of me. Manfred, for God's sake, before this goes farther and it's too late, too late.

I must see the bright normal reality once more, where there is not this schizophrenic killing and alienation and bestial lust and death.

Help me get away from death, back where I belong once more.

Help, Manfred!

Help me...

A voice said, "Get up, Mister, your time has expired."

He opened his eyes.

"More cigarettes, Mister." The dirty, ancient Bleekman priest, in his gray, cobweb-like robes, bent over him, pawing at him, whining his litany again and again against his ear. "If you want to stay, Mister, you have to pay me." He scratched at Arnie's coat, searching.

Sitting up, Arnie looked for Manfred. The boy was gone.

"Get away from me," Arnie said, rising to his feet. He put his hands to his chest and felt nothing.

He went unsteadily to the mouth of the cavern and squeezed out through the crack, into the cold mid-morning sunlight of Mars.

"Manfred!" he yelled. No sign of the boy. Well, he thought, anyhow I am back in the real world. That's what matters.

And he had lost his desire to get Jack Bohlen. He had lost his desire. too, to buy into the land development of these mountains. And he can have Doreen Anderton, for all I care, Arnie said to himself as he started toward the trail up which they had previously come. But I'll keep my word to Manfred. I'll mail him to Earth first chance I get, and maybe the change'll cure him or maybe they have better psychiatrists back Home by now. Anyhow, he won't wind up at that AM-WEB.

As he made his way down the trail, still searching for Manfred, he saw a 'copter flying low overhead and circling. Maybe they saw where the boy went, he said to himself. Both of them, Jack and Doreen, must have been watching all this time. Halting, he waved his arms at the 'copter, indicating that he wanted it to land.

The 'copter dropped cautiously until it rested up the trail from him, in the wide place before the entrance to Dirty Knobby. The door slid aside, and a man stepped out.

"I'm looking for that kid," Arnie began. And then he saw that it was not Jack Bohlen.

It was a man he had never seen before. Good-looking, dark-haired, with wild, emotional eyes, a man who came toward him on a dead run, at the same time waving something that glinted in the sunlight.

"You're Arnie Kott," the man called to him in a shrill voice.

"Yeah, so what?" Arnie said.

"You destroyed my field," the man shrieked at him, and, raising the gun, fired.

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The first bullet missed Arnie. Who are you and why are you shooting at me? Arnie Kott wondered, as he groped in his coat for his own gun. He found it, brought it out, fired back at the running man. Then it came to him who this was. This was the feeble little black-market operator who had been trying to horn in. The one we gave that lesson to, Arnie said to himself.

The running man dodged, fell, rolled over and fired from where he lay. Arnie's shot had missed him, too. His own shot whistled so close to Arnie this time that for a moment he thought he was hit. He put his hand instinctively to his chest. No, he realized, you didn't get me! Raising his pistol, Arnie aimed and prepared to fire once more at the prone figure.

The world blew up around him.

The sun fell from the sky. It dropped into darkness, and with it went Arnie Kott.

After a long time the prone figure stirred. The wild-eyed man crept to his feet cautiously, stood studying Arnie, and then step by step started toward him. As he walked he held his pistol with both hands and aimed it.

A buzzing from above made him peer up. A shadow had swept over him and now a second 'copter bumped to a landing between him and Arnie. The 'copter cut the two men off from one another and Arnie Kott could no longer see the miserable little black-market operator. Out of the 'copter leaped Jack Bohlen. He ran over to Arnie.

"Get that guy," Arnie whispered.

"Can't," Jack said, and pointed. The black-market operator had taken off. His 'copter rose above Dirty Knobby, floundered, then lurched forward, cleared the peak and was gone. "Forget about him. You're badly shot. Think about yourself."

Arnie whispered, "Don't worry about it, Jack. Listen to me." He caught hold of Jack's shirt and dragged him down so that Jack's ear was close by. "I'll tell you a secret," Arnie said. "Something I've discovered. This is another of those schizophrenic worlds. All this goddamn schizophrenic hate and lust and death, it already happened to me once and it couldn't kill me. First time, it was one of those poisoned arrows in the chest. Now this. I'm not worried." He shut his eyes, struggling to keep himself conscious. "Just find that kid. Ask him and he'll tell you."

"You're wrong, Arnie," Jack said, bending down beside him.

"Wrong how?" He could barely see Bohlen, now; the scene had sunk into twilight, and Jack's shape was dim and wraith-like.

You can't fool me, Arnie thought. I know I'm still in Manfred's mind. Pretty soon I'll wake up and I won't be shot, I'll be okay again. And I'll find my way back to my own world where things like this don't happen. Isn't that right? He tried to speak but was unable.

Appearing beside Jack, Doreen Anderton said, "He's going to die, isn't he?"

Jack said nothing. He was trying to get Arnie Kott over his shoulder

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so that he could lug him to the 'copter.

Just another of those gubble-gubble worlds, Arnie said to himself as he felt Jack lift him. It sure taught me a lesson, too. I won't do a nutty thing like this again. He tried to explain that, as Jack carried him to the 'copter. You just did this, he wanted to say. Took me to the hospital at Lewistown to get the arrow out. Don't you remember?

"There's no chance," Jack said to Doreen as he set Arnie inside the 'copter. He panted for breath as he seated himself at the controls.

Sure there is, Arnie thought with indignation. What's the matter with you, aren't you trying. He made an attempt to speak, to tell Jack that, but he could not.

He could say nothing.

The 'copter began to rise from the ground, laboring under the weight of the three people.

During the flight back to Lewistown Arnie Kott died.

Jack Bohlen had Doreen take the controls, and he sat beside the dead man, thinking to himself that Arnie had died still believing he was lost in the dark currents of the autistic Steiner boy's mind. Maybe it's for the best, Jack thought. Maybe it made it easier for him, at the last.

The realization that Arnie Kott was dead filled him, to his incredulity, with grief. It doesn't seem right, he said to himself as he sat by the dead man. It's too harsh. Arnie didn't deserve it for what he did. The things he did were bad, but not that bad.

"What was it he was saying to you?" Doreen asked. She seemed to have taken Arnie's death in her stride. She piloted the 'copter with matter-of-fact skill.

Jack said, "He imagined this wasn't real. He thought he was in a schizophrenic fantasy."

"Poor Arnie," she said.

"Do you know who shot him?"

"Some enemy he must have made along the way somewhere."

They were both silent for a while.

"We should look for Manfred," Doreen said.

"Yes," Jack said. But I know where the boy is right now, he said to himself. He's found some wild Bleekmen there in the mountains, and he's with them. It's obvious and certain. It would have happened sooner or later in any case. He was not worried. He did not care about Manfred. Perhaps, for the first time in his life, the boy was in a situation to which he might make an adjustment. With the wild Bleekmen, he might discern a style of living which was genuinely his and not a pallid, tormented reflection of the lives of those around him, beings who were innately different from him and whom he could never resemble, no matter how hard he tried.

Doreen said, "Could Arnie have been right?"

For a moment he did not understand her. And then, when he had made out her meaning, he shook his head. "No."

"Why was he so sure of it, then?"

"Jack said, "I don't know." But it had to do with Manfred. Arnie had said so, just before he died.

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"In many ways," Doreen said, "Arnie was shrewd. If he thought that, there must have been some very good reason."

"He was shrewd," Jack pointed out, "But he always believed what he wanted to believe." And, he realized, did whatever he wanted to. And so, at last, had brought about his own death; engineered it somewhere along the pathway of his life.

"What's going to become of us now?" Doreen said. "Without him? It's hard for me to imagine it without Arnie. Do you know what I mean? I wish, when we first saw that 'copter land, we had understood what was going to happen. If only we had gotten down there a few minutes earlier—" She broke off. "No use saying that now."

"No use at all," Jack said briefly.

"You know what I think is going to happen to us now?" Doreen said. "We're going to drift away from each other, you and I. Maybe not right away. Maybe not for months. or possibly even years. But sooner or later we will, without him."

He did not try to argue. Perhaps it was so. He was tired of struggling to see ahead to what lay before them all.

"Do you love me still?" Doreen asked. She turned toward him to see his face as he answered.

"Naturally."

"So do I,"she said in a low, wan voice. "But I don't think it's enough. You have your wife and your son. That's so much, in the long run. Anyhow, it was worth it to me. I'll never be sorry. We're not responsible for Arnie's death. We mustn't feel guilty. He brought it on himself, by what he was up to, there at the end. And we'll never know exactly what that was. But I know it was something to hurt us."

He nodded.

Silently, they continued on back to Lewistown, carrying with them the body of Arnie Kott. Carrying Arnie home to his settlement, where he was, and probably always would be, Supreme Good-member of his Water Workers' Union, Fourth Planet Branch.

XXIV

Ascending an ill-marked path in the arid rocks of the F.D.R. Mountains, Manfred Steiner halted as he saw ahead of him a party of six dark shadows, men. They carried with them paka eggs filled with water and quivers of poisoned arrows, and each woman had her pounding block. All smoked cigarettes as they toiled, single-file, along the trail.

Seeing him, they halted.

One of them, a gaunt young male, said politely, "The rain falling from your wonderful presence envigors and restores us, Mister."

Manfred did not understand the words, but he got their thoughts: cautious and friendly, with no undertones of hate. He sensed inside them no desire to hurt him, and that was pleasant. He forgot his fear of them and turned his attention on the animal skins which each wore. What sort of animal is that? he wondered.

The Bleekmen were curious about

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him, too. They advanced until they stood around him on all sides.

"There are monster ships," one of them thought in his direction, "landing in these mountains, with no one aboard. They have excited wonder and speculation, for they appear to be a portent. Already they have begun to assemble themselves on the land to work changes. Are you from them, by any chance?"

"No," Manfred answered, inside his mind, in a way for them to hear and understand.

The Bleekman pointed, and he saw, toward the center of the mountain range, a fleet of UN slave-rocket vehicles hovering in the air. They had arrived from Earth he realized. They were here to break ground. The building of the tracts of houses had begun. AM-WEB and the other structures like it would soon be appearing on the face of the fourth planet.

"We are leaving the mountains because of that," one of the older Bleekman males thought to Manfred. "There is no manner by which we can live here, now that this has started. Through our rock we saw this long ago, but now it is here in actuality."

Within himself, Manfred said, "Can I go with you?"

Surprised, the Bleekmen withdrew to discuss his request. They did not know what to make of him and what he wanted. They had never run across it in an immigrant before.

"We are going out onto the desert," the young male told him at last. "It is doubtful if we can survive there. We can only try. Are you certain you want that for yourself?"

"Yes," Manfred said.

"Come along then," the Bleekmen decided.

They resumed their trek. They were tired, but they swung almost at once into a good pace. Manfred thought at first that he would be left behind, but the Bleekmen hung back for him and he was able to keep up.

The desert lay ahead, for them and for him. But none of them had any regrets. It was impossible for them to turn back anyhow, because they could not live under the new conditions.

I will not have to live in AM-WEB, Manfred said to himself as he kept up with the Bleekmen. Through these dark shadows I will escape.

He felt very good, better than he could remember ever having felt before in his life.

One of the Bleekman females shyly offered him a cigarette from those she carried. Thanking her, he accepted it. They continued on.

And as they moved along, Manfred Steiner felt something strange happening inside him. He was changing.

At dusk, as she was fixing dinner for herself and David and her father-in-law, Silvia Bohlen saw a figure on foot, walking along the edge of the canal. A man, she said to herself. Frightened, she went to the front door, opened it and peered out to see who it was.

"It's me, Silvia," Jack Bohlen said.

Running out of the house and up to his father excitedly, David shouted, "Hey, how come you didn't bring

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your 'copter? Did you come on the tractor bus? I bet you did. What happened to your 'copter, Dad? Did it break down and strand you out in the desert?"

"No more 'copter," Jack said. He looked tired.

"I heard on the radio," Silvia said.

"About Arnie Kott?" He nodded. "Yeah, it's true." Entering the house he took off his coat. Silvia hung it in the closet for him.

"That affects you a lot, doesn't it?" she said.

Jack said, "No job. Arnie had bought my contract." He looked around. "Where's Leo?"

"Taking his nap. He's been gone most of the day on business. I'm glad you got home before he goes. He's leaving for Earth tomorrow, he said. Did you know that the UN has started taking the land in the F.D.R. Range already? I heard that on the radio, too."

"I didn't know," Jack said, going into the kitchen and seating himself at the table. "How about some iced tea to drink?"

As she fixed the iced tea for him she said, "I guess I shouldn't ask you how serious this job business is."

Jack said, "I can get on with almost any repair outfit. Mr. Yee would take me back, as a matter of fact. I'm sure he didn't want to part with my contract in the first place."

"Then why are you so despondent?" she said, and then she remembered about Arnie.

"It's a mile and a half where that tractor bus let me off," he said. "I'm just tired."

"I didn't expect you home." She felt on edge, and it was difficult for her to return to preparing dinner. "We're only having liver and bacon and grated carrots and synthetic butter and a salad. And Leo said he'd like a cake of some sort for dessert. David and I were going to make that later on as a treat for him, because after all he is going, and we may not see him ever again. We have to face that."

"That's fine about the cake," Jack murmured.

Silvia burst out, "I wish you would tell me what's the matter! I've never seen you like this."

Presently he said, "I was thinking of something Arnie said before he died. I was there with him. Arnie said he wasn't in a real world; he was in the fantasy of a schizophrenic, and that's been preying on my mind. It never occurred to me before how much our world is like Manfred's. I thought they were absolutely distinct. Now I see that it's only a question of degree."

"Jack—" she said clumsily, not sure how to put it, but feeling she had to ask. "Do you think our marriage is finished?"

He stared at her a long, long time. "Why do you say that?"

"I just want to hear you say it isn't."

"It isn't," he said, still staring at her; she felt exposed, as if he could read her mind, as if he knew somehow exactly what she had done. "Is there any reason to think it is? Why do you imagine I came home? If we had no marriage, would I have shown up here today after—" he

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was silent then. "I'd like my iced tea," he murmured.

"After what?" she asked.

He said, "After Arnie's death."

Silvia said, "What's she like?"

"Who?"

"The girl. You almost said it just now."

He did not answer for such a long time that she did not think he was going to. And then he said, "She has red hair. I almost stayed with her. But I didn't."

"There's a choice for me, too," Silvia said.

"I didn't know that," he said woodenly. "I didn't realize." He shrugged. "Well, it's good to realize. It's sobering. You're not speaking about theory now are you? You're speaking about reality."

"That's correct," Silvia said.

David came running into the kitchen. "Grandfather Leo's awake," he shouted. "I told him you were home, Dad, and he's real glad and he wants to find out how things are going with you."

"They're going swell," Jack said.

Silvia said to him, "Jack, I'd like for us to go on. If you want to."

"Sure," he said. "You know that I'm back here again." He smiled at her so forlornly that it almost broke her heart. "I came a long way, first on that no-good damn tractor bus, which I hate, and then on foot."

"Are you glad that you came back?"

"I'm glad," he said, and his tone was strong and firm. Obviously he meant it.

"You get to see Grandfather Leo before he goes —" she began.

A scream made her leap, turn to face Jack.

He was on his feet. "Next door! The Steiner house." He ran past her and they both ran outside into the night.

At the front door of the Steiner house one of the Steiner girls met them. "My brother —"

She and Jack pushed past the child, saw into the house. Silvia did not understand what she saw, but Jack seemed to; he took hold of her hand, stopped her from going any farther.

The living room was filled with Bleekmen. In their midst she saw part of a living creature, an old man, only from the chest on up. The rest of him became a tangle of pumps and hoses and dials, machinery that clicked away, unceasingly active.

It kept the old man alive; she realized that in an instant. The missing portion of him had been replaced by it. Oh, God, she thought. Who or what was it, sitting there with a smile on its withered face? And now it spoke to them.

"Jack Bohlen," it rasped. Its voice issued from a mechanical speaker, not from its mouth; it came out of the machinery. "I am here to say good-bye to my mother." It paused, and she heard the machinery speed up as if it were laboring. "Now I can thank you," the old man said.

Jack, standing by her holding onto her hand, said, "For what? I didn't do anything for you."

"Yes, I think so." The thing seated there nodded to the Bleekmen and

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they pushed it and its machinery closer to Jack and straightened it so that it faced him directly. "In my opinion . . ." It lapsed into silence and then it resumed, more loudly, now. "You tried to communicate with me, many years ago. I appreciate that."

"It wasn't long ago," Jack said. "Have you forgotten? You came back to us. It was just today. This is your distant past, when you were a boy."

She said to her husband, *"Who is it?"*

"Manfred."

Putting her hands to her face she covered her eyes; she could not bear to look any longer.

"Did you escape AM-WEB?" Jack asked it.

"Yesss," it hissed, with a gleeful tremor. "I am with my friends." It pointed to the Bleekmen who surrounded it.

"Jack," Silvia said, "take me out of here! Please, I can't stand it." She clung to him, and he then led her from the Steiner house, out once more into the night darkness.

Both Leo and David met them, agitated and frightened. "Say, son," Leo said, "what happened? What was that woman screaming about?"

Jack said, "It's all over. Everything's okay." To Silvia he said, "She must have run outside. She didn't understand at first."

Shivering, Silvia said, "I don't understand either and I don't want to. Don't try to explain it to me." She returned to the stove, turning down the burners, looking into pots to see what had burned.

"Don't worry," Jack said, patting her.

She tried to smile.

"It probably won't occur again," Jack said. "But even if it does—"

"Thanks," she said. "I thought when I first saw him that it was his father, Norbert Steiner. That's what frightened me so."

"We'll have to get a flashlight and hunt around for Erna Steiner," Jack said. "We want to be sure she's all right."

"Yes," she said. "You and Leo go and do that while I finish here; I have to stay with the dinner or it'll be spoiled."

The two men, with a flashlight, left the house. David stayed with her, helping her set the table. Where will you be? she wondered as she watched her son. When he's old like that, most of him hacked away and replaced my machinery . . . will you be like that, too?

We are better off not being able to look ahead, she said to herself. In the darkness of the Martian night her husband and father-in-law searched for Erna Steiner. Their light flashed here and there, and their voices could be heard, business-like and competent and patient.

END

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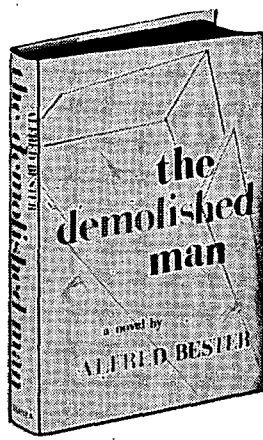

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